MANADA DEVI

AN EDUCATED WOMAN IN PROSTITUTION

a memoir of lust, exploitation, deceit

translated by Arunava Sinha

An Educated Woman in Prostitution

A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit
(Calcutta, 1929)

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Translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha

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Chapter the First

In Childhood

I WAS BORN ON THE 18th of Ashadh in the year 1307 (1900 on the Gregorian calendar). My father was a Brahmin man from a respectable family, and I was his first child. I am unable to disclose his name and family background, for many of his offspring, close relatives and other members of the extended family are alive. Their social standing is not insignificant, and this memoir might come into their possession. I have no desire to disconcert them.

My grandfather was a householder of considerable means, with four town houses in Calcutta and a house with a large garden in the suburbs. When of advancing years, he retired from the service of His Majesty's Government. My father was a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court, where his practice became successful rapidly, even requiring him to travel from time to time.

He had married when studying for his law degree, when my grandfather was still alive. My mother's family resided in Calcutta too; they were not particularly wealthy, but my grandfather was eager to have my mother as his daughter-in-law because of her high birth and exquisite beauty. He died two years after my birth—it is only in my memory now that the pleasure of being held in his arms remains.

I was not neglected because I was a girl. Some of my father's friends would say, 'A daughter as the first child is a harbinger of fortune.' Although they said it in jest, there appeared to be some truth in it; my father had established his legal practice a few months before my birth, and it flourished by the day. It wasn't long before he had purchased a small zamindari with an annual income of 10,000 rupees at an auction.

I was sickly during my childhood, making my mother perpetually anxious. My grandfather spent unstintingly on my health; I have been told

he was gazing at me on his deathbed, even at the very moment when he died. Today I feel this saintly man passed on his last breath to me, enabling me to survive every time I have been on the brink of death myself.

When I was three years old, I was afflicted by a complicated fever that led all the well-known doctors of the city, allopathic and ayurvedic, to give up on me. All my sense organs had ceased functioning. But the great physician, the late Dwarakanath Sen, proved especially adept at treating me.

My mother prayed to the god Shiva daily. One day, overcome by distress, she fell unconscious on the floor of her prayer-room. When she regained consciousness, she said, ‘Khukumoni will recover, there is nothing to worry about anymore.’ I do not know whether she received a reassurance from the god she cherished in her heart, but it was true that thereafter I began to heal without the intervention of medicines. I regained my health once again in the space of four months.

There was one specific reaction to her fervour, however; my body began to wax like the moon in a cloudless sky. Family and neighbours alike expressed their surprise as my form filled out, my face glowed, my hair grew thicker and longer, and my demeanour became more joyful. In the past I was quiet and restrained; but after my illness I turned energetic. I would ask my mother for money to buy biscuits and lozenges and run to the stationery shop at the corner, or I would run about on our wide terrace to catch drifting kites—I had no fear of falling. Sometimes I would accompany our household maids to their homes, my mischiefs would exasperate the servants. I was prone to entering my father’s drawing room and creating a commotion. With no other children at home, I was the only one whose shouts and laughter would echo across the entire house. But I was embarrassed when my father recounted these incidents from my childhood.

Taking a bath was one of my greatest pleasures. At my mother’s request, my father had had a large tank constructed for me in the courtyard, with a

beautiful fountain spouting water in the middle. I had learnt how to swim at the age of six or seven; before going in for a bath I would fetch all the children of my age in the neighbourhood. We would play for hours in the water, shouting and laughing with joy. My mother's indulgence kept my father from scolding me.

There was one more habit I had developed—of going out for a ride in the motor car every afternoon. When my father could not accompany me, my mother did. A cousin of mine from my mother's side—his name was Nandalal, I called him Nanda-dada—used to live at our house so that he could study in a nearby school. Sometimes I would take a walk with him. The sight of the beautifully decorated shops on either side of the road, the trams, the chains of electric lights, the crowds of passers-by, all gave me unsurpassed joy. Even as a young girl I was a frequent visitor to the Alipore Zoo, the museum at Chowringhee, the Howrah Bridge, the gardens of Pareshnath, and the temple at Kalighat.

I was more inclined towards having birds at home than playing with dolls. My father would get me all manner of beautiful birds; among them were pigeons, mynahs, parrots, cockatoos, nightingales and magpies. I was neither fond of dogs or cats, nor attracted to flowers. As I grew older, however, my fascination with birds lessened.

My mother died while giving birth to a stillborn second child. I was ten years old, and the year was 1910. I was aware of what death meant; no one could delude me with falsehoods or console me. I threw myself on the floor, crying uncontrollably. My father picked me up in his arms, but I thrashed about like a lamb being taken to the slaughter and climbed down. The neighbours bedecked by mother's dead body with flowers and took her away; I ran after them. I recall stumbling and falling face down on the pavement after a short distance. Looking up, I discovered the bearers of the body receding in the distance; all that remained in my vision were the soles

of my mother’s feet, the edges lined with red altaa, peeping out at the bottom of the cot on which she had been laid.

My tears know no bounds today as I write of my tragic life. All the tears that I have shed all these years have, it seems to me, gathered at my mother’s feet to moisten the dried lines of red on them and make them fresh again.

My father had wept copiously at my mother’s demise, refusing to eat for three days before giving in to his friends’ collective requests. A giant bromide enlargement of my mother’s photograph in sepia tones used to hang on my father’s walls; he had given it to me as a gift on my seventh birthday. He had spent seven hundred and fifty rupees on having it made in England. He would put a garland of fresh flowers on it every day now, after my mother’s death.

I had joined Bethune School while my mother was still alive: I was a student in the sixth class when she died. A private tutor used to teach Nanda-dada and me at home. But my father withdrew me from school after my mother’s death, and appointed a reputed teacher to be in charge of my education. Perhaps he had made these arrangements so as to keep me near him in an effort to mitigate his own suffering. In any event, this change did no harm to my education.

Six months passed. The swadeshi movement in Bengal was followed immediately afterwards by a spate of bomb attacks by revolutionaries. Exile for the leaders, gaol for the young men, arrests for the revolutionaries, death sentences for those caught with bombs—all of these created a furore. There were meetings and gatherings everywhere, gymnasiums were set up to train the youth in stick-to-stick combat. My father was involved with the revolutionaries; sometimes Nanda-dada used to take me to the meetings demanding independence, where I would hear fiery speeches being made.

There is something I have forgotten to mention—I could sing rather well. I had a natural understanding of melody and tempo, and apparently my

voice was sweet. Anyone who heard me sing would praise me. I cannot tell how I acquired this musical ability, for neither of my parents were musicians of note. My father did purchase an excellent table harmonium for me, besides engaging someone to teach me to sing and to play the esraj.

One day I discovered that Nanda-dada had got a pair of long daggers from somewhere. Putting them down on the table in front of me, he said, ‘You must learn how to use knives, Maani.’

Picking up one of them, I said, ‘What are you saying, Nanda-da?’ He picked up the other one, holding it by the handle and pointing the blade at my chest, while gripping my wrist with his right hand and striking a pose that suggested he was indeed about to attack me.

On my part I gripped his right wrist with my left hand, whereupon he said, ‘That’s right, this is how to ward off an attack.’ I had watched a demonstration by young men at a swadeshi meeting.

I asked, ‘What use is it for girls to learn any of this?’

Nandalal said, ‘Why, haven’t you heard the song, pick up the knife to protect your honour, my mother?’

‘Yes, I know it,’ I said and took myself off at once to the harmonium to remove the lid and press the keys as I sang.

When the song ended my father came in to ask, ‘And what’s going on here, Khuku?’ Nanda-dada disappeared at once with the daggers through a different door; I still remember the incident clearly.

One day my father took me to a swadeshi meeting, where I performed the same song, receiving great praise from everyone. My father delivered a speech at the meeting too, where the late Surendranath Bandhyopadhyay was the chairman. I did not know it then, but that was the beginning of my ruination.

The severe flooding of the Damodar River had at that time led to the inhabitants of Burdwan, as well those of far-flung places around it, losing their homes and suffering great distress. A charity fund was started for the

magnanimous sections of the population to contribute money in order to alleviate their plight. Benefit nights of films and plays, and other forms of entertainment, were organised to collect additional amounts.

My father took me to the theatre and the cinema several times; Nanda-dada accompanied us. I was charmed by the acting and singing of the actors and actresses on stage. The first plays I watched being performed were, as I remember, *Debi Chowdhurani* and *Alibaba*. I learnt to sing ‘Beena baaje na kyano’ from *Debi Chowdhurani* and ‘Chhi chhi etta janjal’ from *Alibaba* with such perfection that my father would make me perform them repeatedly at home. Going to the bioscope every Sunday became a habit. Sometimes I would be accompanied by Nanda-dada, and at other times by my father, who also took me to the Brahmo Samaj meditation temple on some Sundays. He was not of the Brahmo faith, but he was as liberal-minded as Brahmos when it came to social practices.

My father used to drape a garland of fresh flowers over my mother’s picture every single day after her death.

No garlands are placed on her portrait now. A single strand of dried marigolds had lain across the picture for a long time before a servant swept it away one day. None of us was perturbed or unhappy about this. My house tutor would be present from six in the morning till nine, and then again from one to four in the afternoon. Occasional visits to the theatre on Saturdays, and regular visits to the bioscope on Sundays were a part of my routine.

Thanks to Nanda-dada, I had acquired the art of knife-play, which a long scar on my right arm still bears testimony to. I had to abandon knives on my father’s orders, and this fascination was replaced by one for storybooks. My house tutor used to encourage me greatly in this pursuit.

After *Debi Chowdhurani*, the next two plays I watched were, as I recollect, *Bhromor* and *Kapalkundala*. One day my house tutor told me,

‘One cannot savour Bankimchandra’s essence and beauty without reading his books in the original.’

We had three cupboards filled with books at home; my tutor searched them to retrieve Bankim-babu’s collected works for me. I proceeded to read his novels during every waking hour. I did not always comprehend the meaning, but it generated an exquisite rapture in my heart. My widowed aunt, my father’s eldest sister, who had moved into our house to look after me, kept a constant vigil to ensure that I faced no inconveniences. One day I heard her tell my father, ‘It’s been almost a year, khoka. It wouldn’t be right to delay things any longer. You know the rules, it’s not as though you are not aware of the need to preserve the lineage to honour your ancestors.’ I did not understand then what she was talking about.

My father had me re-admitted to Bethune School some time later, where I joined the fifth class. I began using the school bus, for my father said that he had to use the car quite often now, which meant it would not always be available to take me to school and bring me back on time. The house tutor continued visiting in the morning and the evening to teach me.

I used to sleep in the same bed as my mother as long as she was alive. After her death I started sleeping in my father’s room, on a second bed. One day he told me, ‘You must sleep with your pishima from now on.’ I had never disobeyed him.

Another day, my father sent for the servant and said, pointing to my mother’s large portrait on the wall, ‘Hang this in Khuku’s study.’ He had purchased two large, new bookcases and a mahogany desk for me, which had been arranged in my study. Now they were joined by a beautiful carpet on the floor, an expensive cut-glass inkpot, and a Waterman fountain pen. Summer had set in, the electric fan in my study was given a fresh coat of paint. And my mother’s picture took its place on the wall, amongst four western landscapes that were already there. My house tutor admired the

new embellishments to the room. And I immersed myself in my studies, novels, the theatre and the cinema.

Some time afterwards on a spring morning, the strains of wedding music began to play outside the front door. Neighbours, friends and family were absorbed in merriment, my aunt was engrossed with the rituals. I came upon my father dressed as a new groom. A palanquin appeared, bedecked with flowers. The procession glittered with lights as evening fell, and I, too, joined in the celebrations. Passing my study, however, my eyes fell suddenly on my mother’s portrait. I came to an abrupt halt; my eyes brimmed over with tears. Then I turned and went to bed. No one noticed; when I woke up next morning, my stepmother had arrived.

Chapter the Second

In Adolescence

GRADUALLY THE TUMULT OF THE CELEBRATIONS died down, and reality began to dawn on me with every passing day. There was no requirement for my aunt to remain with us; she explained the details of the household to the new bride and returned home after six or seven months. I began to sleep alone in her room.

My stepmother was one year older than me, but because of my well-developed body, I was the one who looked older. She was pretty, and had a rudimentary grasp of domestic chores and an elemental education. There was no reason for us to not get along, for I was busy with my studies most of the time.

My stepmother would find a pretext to be close to my father whenever he visited the inner chambers. I no longer met him for any reason other than specific requirements. Earlier, he would enquire after my studies, and sit by me to listen to me sing, but not any longer. I did not accompany him and my stepmother when they went to the theatre; I went to the bioscope with Nanda-dada instead.

For reasons unknown to me, my old house tutor was relieved of his responsibilities. ‘You are making progress with your education, the tutor is old-fashioned, you need someone familiar with teaching methods in schools and colleges.’

My new tutor arrived a few days later. It is necessary to provide some details here.

I was attracted to his appearance and nature on the very first day. He had long hair brushed back from his forehead, ending in thick curls at his shoulder, and seemed to be about twenty-two or twenty-three. It was not clear to me whether he was clean-shaven, or whether his whiskers had

never grown. His dhoti fitted him loosely, like the baggy pyjamas favoured by kabuliwallahs. The upper half of his body was covered in a milk white panjabi—khadi was not the fashion yet. His nose was sharp and elegant, and he had beautiful eyes, which, however, were transformed by his gold-framed glasses. His feet were shod in nagrai shoes embroidered with imitation zari. His complexion bordered on the dark, he was of relatively slight build, and his voice was like the notes of a flute. Having passed his BA examination recently, he now worked as a schoolteacher. My new tutor was unmarried.

My education progressed very well with him. He was not particularly skilled at teaching mathematics, but he was an excellent teacher when it came to history and literature, especially poetry. He used to come both in the morning and in the evening; meanwhile, I was promoted from the Fourth Class to the Third.

Nanda-dada studied two classes above me; he was due to have been promoted to the entrance class. But because of a lack of concentration, he failed his annual examination, and had to stay back in the second class. Nanda-dada and I used to take lessons from the same tutor.

A few days later the tutor told me, ‘Don’t address me as mastar-moshai, Maanu, I dislike it. You may call me by my name.’ Without the slightest awkwardness, I replied, ‘Just as you dislike the word “moshai”, I too do not care to add the word “babu” after a name. Have you not seen babu as a suffix has been replaced by srijoot as a prefix these days?’

Smiling, he said, ‘Very well, you may call me Mukul-dada. You do know my name is Mukul Bandyopadhyay?’ In this manner an intimacy began to develop between my tutor and me, and I began to address him as dada.

One day my father sent for me to say, ‘Your tutor is used to having a cup of tea every morning and afternoon, khuku. Why don’t you make the arrangements for him here, he can come a little earlier in that case.’

Tea would be made twice a day in our house. Earlier, it was my custom to drink tea with my father, but nowadays it was my stepmother who took his cup of tea to him. He never sent for me anymore, and I didn't go either, preferring to finish my tea by myself in my study, before my tutor arrived.

But now it was he who became my companion for a cup of tea—we would mostly talk about politics and society. The nationalist leaders were talking about 'self-empowerment' then. My tutor said, 'The composers of the shastras have said that there is happiness in complete self-reliance, and misery in relying on others. Leave alone our food and clothing, we have to depend on other people for the slightest of things. For example, we cannot even have a cup of tea unless the servant makes it for us. And yet the task takes no more than two minutes. Our society and our lives are seeing a proliferation of such luxuries.'

I made my father buy me a small electric heater. Plugging it into an electric point in my study made it simpler to heat the water for the tea. When my tutor arrived the next day, I made the tea myself in his presence and offered him a cup. Accepting it joyfully, he said, 'Seeds of advice can indeed flower if they fall on fertile ground.' I did not realise then that I had captured his heart well before offering him that cup of tea.

The High Court was on a long hiatus on account of the Durga Puja celebrations. My father took my stepmother on a holiday, accompanied only by a pair of servants. I was eager to go too, but I could not bring myself to tell him this, for it was obvious well beforehand that he had no intention of taking me along. I was deeply hurt. Neither my father nor my stepmother wrote to me from their travels; the only letters that came contained money for household expenses and for my aunt, who was staying with us again because my father and stepmother were away.

One day Nanda-dada said, 'Shall we go to the Minerva Theatre today, Maani? Let's go, *Shireen-Farhad*, such a lovely opera, all those songs and dances.' He showed me a notice for the play. When we sought permission

from my aunt, she said, ‘You are children still, perhaps you should take master-moshai with you.’ Needless to say, our tutor had no objections.

The three of us reserved a box. I was enthralled by the performance and particularly enchanted by the singing and dancing. My tutor explained every scene and character to me. Farhad’s unmatched love and Shireen’s self-sacrifice brought great joy to my heart. I felt a sleeping creature within me coming to life.

My tutor would often take me to the theatre and the cinema; my enjoyment would not be complete without his presence, for he explained everything clearly to me. When spiritual plays like *Bilwamangal* or *Shankaracharya* were performed, my aunt would accompany us too. She was particularly fond of devotional drama.

My father was still away from home when I was afflicted with fever. My aunt was deeply worried, while my house tutor stayed by my bed all day and night, taking care of me. From fetching the doctor to procuring medicines, from preparing my food to keeping a vigil over me, he used to perform each of these tasks; he stopped taking classes at the school where he worked. He massaged me when the pain was unbearable, and stroked my forehead so that I could sleep. He fed me grapes and pomegranates and pears with his own hands. All of this reassured my aunt to an extent.

Every time I sought my mother, crying, I noticed him shedding tears of compassion. He knew my mother was dead, and I was neglected by my father. When I recovered after a month, I told him faintly, ‘You have saved my life, Mukul-dada.’ He said, ‘God has saved your life, Maanu.’ Taking his hand, I told him in a voice brimming with emotion, ‘I shall never be able to repay this debt of affection, Mukul-dada.’

We began to address each other informally after this, and our hearts seemed to come closer. One day he handed me a beautifully bound slim volume of poetry, saying, ‘My book *Jhorna* has been published, Maanu.

The opportunity I received to take care of you was so memorable that I have dedicated my first volume of poetry to you.'

Accepting the book, I said, a little shyly, 'You never told me you were publishing your poems, Mukul-dada.' He smiled. 'Is that a crime?'

When he taught me English poetry, my tutor would translate some fragments into Bengali. So I had an inkling of his poetic sensibilities. Many of the poems in *Jhorna* had been written in my presence, but now that they had materialised in the form of a book, I discovered new sentiments in them.

My father and my stepmother returned after five months, having been to Delhi, Agra, Mathura, Vrindavan, Lahore, Prayag, Kashi, Gaya and other places. He had not been to the High Court for more than two months after it had reopened; he no longer seemed inclined to continue with his legal practice, and turned his attention to taking care of the family assets.

A distant cousin of mine came to our house to meet my father on a matter of employment. I did not recall ever meeting him before, but he came up to me and asked with utmost familiarity, 'How are you, Maanu? Which class are you in now? Who's teaching you at home?' I said, 'I'm in the Second Class at Bethune. My private tutor's name is Mukul.'

'You mean… our Mukul Banerjee… who wrote *Jhorna*?' he said in surprise. 'He's my classmate, we studied together at Scottish Church College.' When my tutor arrived in the afternoon, my cousin said, 'Well Mukul, I'm told you're teaching Maanu. I'm glad to hear that. And what are your other pursuits, besides poetry?'

My tutor conversed with my cousin for a long time. The he turned to me and said, 'You never told me Ramesh-babu is related to you, Maanu.'

I said, 'I didn't know it myself. My father introduced us the other day.'

Ramesh-dada said, 'I have been here only once, about ten years ago. Manada must have been three or four then, I had just taken my entrance examinations. Then the Swadeshi movement broke out, I was caught up in

it and gave up studies. Then I joined college, passed my MA examinations last year, and have been waiting for a job since then.'

My father's efforts resulted in an attractive position for Ramesh-dada as the head clerk of a limited company, with a monthly salary of two hundred rupees. He stayed in our house for nearly a month before shifting to a commodious room in a boarding house. To my father, he said, 'Let me save some money first; then I shall rent a house so that I can bring my mother, wife and younger brothers and sisters to live with me.'

My aunt had left. Ever since my mother's death, all meals were prepared by a cook, and the household was looked after by two maids and three servants. I never lacked in daily necessities; in fact, there was a deluge of delicious foods and fine clothing; my bedroom and study were impeccably done up—all arrangements for my comfort were flawless. Still my heart would not be satiated, its demands were kept alive by my father's indifference and neglect. When I saw working class people passing by on the streets, lovingly holding their children in their arms, I used to curse all my riches. By now I knew only too well that meeting physical needs alone did not amount to giving love—food and clothing were not a tender touch—love and affection was a matter of the heart, they went deep within with their feelings.

On the eve of my thirteenth birthday, my father sent for me. 'Invite your tutor and Ramesh-dada tomorrow, khuku.' I was no longer keen on celebrating, but the day went by somehow. My stepmother gave me a gold necklace as a gift. From Ramesh-dada I received a handsome powder case of silver, and my tutor, if I remember correctly, gave me a volume of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry.

I had been trying my hand at writing short stories and poems. Ramesh-dada showered praises on me after reading them. 'These are rather good, ask Mukul to have them published somewhere. They publish such rubbish from women these days.'

Ramesh-dada accompanies us to the theatre nowadays. Nanda-dada no longer came along, for he had become engrossed in football and cricket. The poor fellow was particularly impervious to theatre and literature, and did not realise that acting involves art. He was happy as long as there were battle scenes, dancing and singing, and elaborate costumes on stage.

A change was coming over the theatre at the time. Educated young men from cultured families joined the stage and developed its artistic elements. Ramesh-dada and Mukul-dada knew the worth of these unique artistes and complimented them generously. From Ramesh-dada I learnt the names of many actors and actresses. He told me some of their life stories, which not even Mukul-dada was aware of.

Two years after his second entry into matrimony, my father had a son. He had completely abandoned his legal practice by now. I was exceedingly fond of my stepbrother, although I could not carry him in my arms all the time because of the ayah and the maid appointed specially to look after him. My stepmother fell ill after childbirth, which made my father inordinately anxious. Well-known doctors—both allopathic and ayurvedic—paid frequent visits. My stepmother did recover after some eight or nine months, but she did not regain her strength fully.

I came to know that some of my father’s friends and my aunt had been broaching the subject of my marriage to my father. My father said, ‘I do not intend to have her marry so young. We shall see after she has passed her matriculation examination.’ It is unnecessary to record the responses of my aunt and of my father’s friends here; readers can peruse the debates and discussions raging in the newspapers on the subject.

I had experienced my sexual awakening. In the absence of a watchful guardian, I realised only too well that an unfriendly wind was blowing in, fanning my proclivities. I even used to be desirous of marriage.

Chapter the Third

Running Away

I HAD MADE THREE INTIMATE friends among the girls at Bethune College. Among them, I shall speak of Kamala in some detail, for my life was inextricably linked with hers. I no longer meet any of my childhood friends; I have forgotten most of them, but I have not yet forgotten Kamala. Perhaps she has not forgotten me either. As I write this memoir now, I recall her at every moment—all the joys and sorrows from my past are flooding back.

Kamala was wondrously beautiful—why do I say was, she still is, possibly. On women's beauty, the male claim is that twenty is the end of all glory. This is not applicable to all and sundry; there are many women in Hindu society who have passed another twenty years after the first twenty, but whose beauty flows like a river after the rains, as untainted as the moonlight in autumn, without a trace of a blemish. Perhaps my readers are laughing at me, who, despite being a woman herself, is attracted to the beauty of another.

It was not just her beauty but also her qualities with which Kamala had conquered my heart. All my life I have been the recipient of her love and compassion in equal measure. She was as adept at entertainment or music or banter as she was at studies or games. Conducting the annual prize distribution at school, or any other programme for that matter, was impossible without her help. She used to teach the other girls how to sing and how to act.

Once, a variety programme was conducted at the University Institute to raise funds for a building for a girls' school. The students of Bethune and Diocesan joined hands to enact selected scenes from Nabina Sen's poem *Kurukshetra*. I played Shailaja, and Kamala, Jaratkaru. The audience marvelled at the performance. My house tutor had composed the lyrics of

two songs for me to sing as Shailaja, which Kamala had set to music. The songs expressed the pain in Shailaja's heart at her inability to win Arjun's heart. I still sing them sometimes for some peace of mind.

Kamala belonged to a family of the Vaidya caste; she lived in a simple two-storied building in the Baghbazar area of Kolkata with her mother. Her father had to travel on work, and only spent a month or a fortnight intermittently at home in Kolkata. Kamala had a school-going brother who was six years younger.

Since the house belonged to Kamala's family, the two hundred rupees that her father sent home every month was sufficient for a comfortable life.

I visited Kamala often at home. Her mother was a tranquil and affectionate woman who would lovingly give me many delicacies to eat. Deprived as I was of a mother's love, I quickly grew devoted to her. 'You're my Kamala's younger sister,' she would tell me frequently. Kamala was two years older than me.

A friend of her father's used to live in Kashi; his efforts led to Kamala being married to a young man whom he knew. The wedding had taken place two years earlier, when Kamala was in the Third Class, just like me. The young man was employed in Kashi, where his parents also lived. Kamala would visit her husband during the summer holidays. I had read every one of the letters they exchanged—she and I would analyse their significance in secret.

There was much ribaldry and laughter over such letters amongst the girls in our class. I had two or three other married friends, and I was privy to the mysteries of their romances with their husbands. The first words of love, the wedding night, the feigning of anger, the behaviour of men—all of these were the subjects of regular discussions among the girls. They gave me the ingredients for my poetry and short stories, which was why Mukul-dada used to say, 'I'm getting the flavour of realism in your stories and poems, Maanu.'

Kamala had been separated from her husband for eight or nine months. The reason was shocking; her father-in-law had been told that her mother was not her father's legally wedded wife, but merely his mistress. Therefore he could not knowingly give an illegitimate child the status of his daughter-in-law. He had written to say that he would no longer accept Kamala in his family, and was going to get his son married again. He had also threatened to expose the scandal in the courts if Kamala sought maintenance, and would file a counter-case against her father, accusing him of deception.

The letters that Kamala's husband had written to her on the matter were extremely tragic. He loved her greatly, and she, too, was deeply attached to him, but this bond of love had been cruelly severed. 'My hands are tied,' Kamala's husband had written. 'I know it is not your fault, but I cannot disobey my father. Forgive me, Kamala. With dharma as my witness I took you as my wife, now it is for the sake of the same dharma that I am leaving you. Even after the agnipariksha Ramchandra had not been able to live with his tainted wife; he had had to abandon a woman like Sita. Goodbye, you will have my love forever, but not as my wife.'

It was I who had drafted the reply for Kamala. She had no desire to respond, for she had been deeply hurt. Although she tried to forget it by keeping herself engaged in various pursuits, I could see deep into her heart. On my request and advice, what she wrote was: 'May you remain firm in your decision, may your devotion to your father not be shaken. But you have not followed the final act of the example you cited of India's great and ideal glory; you have forgotten Parashuram's acts of repentance, the bed of arrows that Bhishma laid on, Ramchandra's own lament. Parashuram had had to go on a long pilgrimage to dislodge the hatchet with which he had killed his mother; his devotion to his father had not saved him. Bhishma's Kshatriya might was vanquished at the hands of a eunuch because of the penance of Amba, whose love he rejected. Devotion to his father didn't save him either. Every act in this world has its own independent consequence.

One person cannot obstruct another. It is not my place to give you advice, forgive me for my outspokenness. You are noble, which has enabled you to pledge your love to me even after abandoning me. But I am not—I am small and insignificant—I shall allow myself to drift on the current, I do not know where.'

This letter of Kamala's received a reply too. Her husband had written, 'I have realised my folly, and when it is time to atone, I shall humbly accept my punishment. Wherever you might be then, spare a thought for this wretched man.' It was obvious that Kamala's husband had a heart, that he was compassionate, but enslaved by his circumstances. The rules that society has constructed prevents many hearts such as his from following their natural desires; social mores act as obstacles to the flowering of human lives.

I did not investigate the veracity of the scandalous claims circulated about Kamala's mother. The sun does not care for the fact that the lotus has its roots in the mud, it is happy to help the flower bloom on the water, after which the breeze makes its stalk sway, and the bee drinks its nectar.

Kamala was a frequent visitor to our house, and my father was fond of her too. Kamala, Ramesh-dada, Mukul-dada and I would go out together from time to time. We were invited to tea at Kamala's house occasionally; her mother may not have kept a rich man's house, but she never neglected to look after us, preparing all the food herself.

My father had no objection to my keeping company with anyone, without any restrictions. As I have said before, his social outlook was liberal. There was an empty field behind our house, I requested my father to have a tennis court built over there. Nanda-dada took the initiative, and every afternoon, Ramesh-dada, Mukul-dada, Nanda-dada, Kamala and I, along with some other friends, played tennis here. Mukul-dada had no idea how to play—I forced him to learn. Kamala was a skilful player, she always played against

me, with Ramesh-dada and Mukul-dada taking turns to be her partner or mine.

My stepmother had brought a maid named Harimati from her own house; she did not have to do a maid's work, however—she was my stepmother's personal assistant or private secretary. Aged about forty-five or forty-six, she was probably a widow, for she was always dressed in white, and wore neither vermilion nor the bangle of a married woman, though she did have a slim single-strand flat necklace around her neck and four gold bangles on her wrists. Harimati fasted on ekadoshi, used fragrant hair oil, and chewed on paan and tobacco round the clock. And it was not as though she did not look contemptuously at the poor servants.

Harimati had chosen a secluded corner of the house for her bedroom, which she used to carefully keep under lock and key. She would have her afternoon siesta there, and, not having any duties of her own, would attempt to supervise all the other household staff and create unnecessary trouble.

Harimati could not stand my ways. She began with complaints against me to my stepmother, who, however, being only a little older than me, possessed neither my mother's gravity nor her ability to discipline me. She was not brusque or irritable either; therefore she said nothing to me. Thwarted, Harimati took her complaint to my father, but met with no success there.

Finally she proceeded to admonish me herself. One day she told me, 'How can you behave this way, khukumoni? The neighbours are talking. It's one thing to have a cousin or a tutor, but you have to behave like a lady with them. What is all this constant giggling and falling all over them? You are of marriageable age, you would have been a mother by now had you been married.'

None of what Harimati was saying was untrue, which was why I did not protest, but listened with downcast eyes. Confrontations are not in my nature, and particularly in this case I knew it would be futile to argue. In

order to frighten me, Harimati told me that the neighbours had come to know everything about me, but I knew that if ever I earned a bad name in the neighbourhood, it would be because of her.

Very soon my assumptions were confirmed; when Harimati saw her threats were not going to quell me, she proceeded to spread calumnies about me. Eventually it came to the attention of my father, who did not believe her. Instead, he told the bearer of the rumour, ‘As soon as women move about freely, people in our country try to sully their reputations with falsehoods. Women’s independence is not yet accepted in our land.’

I grew even more adamant. Mukul-dada had once told me in the course of conversation, ‘The more obstacles there are in the path of love, the stronger it grows.’ I discovered proof of this in my own heart.

As unbridled sensuality swelled in the first flush of my youth, I found myself in the close company of two young men—Mukul and Ramesh. Following the dictates of nature, the unstoppable force of desire flowed like a torrent towards them. There was no maternal affection or love and care to hold me back. Today I feel that I would not have walked on this road had my mother been alive. If my father had turned his attention to me even once, if he had been even slightly caring or if he had controlled me, my life would possibly have taken a different turn.

Mukul-dada was a little timid by nature, while Ramesh-dada was bold and reckless. One afternoon, on a day that schools and offices were closed, he went up to my father, who was reading in the drawing room, to ask, ‘Where’s Maani, kakababu?’

My father said, ‘Upstairs, why?’ Ramesh-dada said, ‘We’re going to the Botanical Gardens today, if Maani wants to come, we’ll take kakima too.’

My father said, ‘Ask her.’

Ramesh-dada walked directly into my bedroom, where I was reclining in bed, reading the *Gitagovinda*. Sitting down next to me, he said, ‘Shall we go to the Botanical Gardens today, Maani?’

I said, ‘No Ramesh-dada, I’m not feeling well today.’ Placing his hand on my brow, he said, ‘You seem fine, let me see your hand.’ Drawing my left hand to himself he checked my pulse and said, ‘Nothing’s wrong with you, you’re playing games.’ Lacing his fingers in mine, he began to squeeze my hand. Ecstasy flowed through my body like an electric current.

Lying down on my side, I chuckled. ‘You think you can diagnose all diseases just by checking the pulse and the brow?’ Interpreting my light-hearted statement correctly, Ramesh-dada said, ‘Then I have to conduct an examination without a stethoscope.’

He left the room after a while. I was like a wild tiger who had tasted blood for the first time. There was no fear or repentance—on the contrary, my anxiety and hesitation disappeared. I realised that if there was an inclination there would always be opportunities.

Six or seven months passed, while I kept adding fuel to the fire of nature. Ramesh-dada was still staying at his boarding house, and had not yet brought his family to live with him, using some pretext or the other every time it came up. Mukul-dada was attracted to Kamala; he had even indicated his willingness to marry her under Brahmo wedding laws. I was pleased by this—but Kamala still maintained her distance, for she had not yet forgotten her previous husband.

One day Ramesh-dada told me, we cannot go on like this in this house. ‘Let us go somewhere where I can see you all the time, where I can have you in my heart every moment. Now that the torrent has burst out of the mountain, let it flow to the open plains.’ I put my arms around Ramesh-dada without answering, laid my head on his chest, and burst into tears.

Our annual examination was imminent. I wanted more time to study at home; I told my father that the school bus picked me up on the first trip, at 9 am, although classes did not start till 10.30 am. This was a waste of time. My father said, ‘The car is at the garage for repairs. Take a taxi to school until it’s back. Nandalal and you can leave together, he will take you to your

school and then go on to his own.’ Nanda-dada and I started taking a taxi to and from school.

For two or three days I had been throwing up, my mouth filling with saliva every time. Ramesh-dada was silent for some time when I told him. The next day he said, ‘I have taken four months’ leave, Maani. Come, let’s go away. We must not delay; tomorrow you must contrive to drop Nandalal first and then come to my place in the taxi. I’ll pack for both of us, I have asked Mukul to buy everything we need.’ I was delirious with joy.

Mukul-dada came at the appointed hour for my lessons. He was aware of my love affair with Ramesh-dada, and even wrote a set of poems to mark the occasion—a new book of poetry named *Madhuri*.

The next day Nanda-dada and I left for school at the usual hour in a taxi. I didn’t take my books, explaining, ‘We’re revising for the exams, what do we need books for.’ Glancing at his watch, he said, ‘Oh, I’m late, Maanu.’ I said, ‘Then let’s go to your school first, Nanda-dada, I have some time before I have to be at school.’ This is how unexpected opportunities come our way. I had been wondering how to arrange to go to Nanda-dada’s school first. He who inspires the honest, also supplies the thief with all he needs.

From Nanda-dada’s school I went directly to Ramesh-dada’s house. I found Mukul-dada there as well. Ramesh-dada got into another taxi with me, carrying a suitcase. This was where I said goodbye to Mukul-dada. I hadn’t had the time to inform Kamala, so I asked him to let her know everything that had happened. The taxi left for Howrah Station. Looking back, I saw Mukul-dada wiping away his tears.

I had meant to stop for a moment in front of my mother’s portrait to seek her blessings before leaving home, but I was too unsettled to remember. Perhaps it was just as well, for if I had gazed upon her I would not have been able to perform an act of such repugnant desperation.

Chapter the Fourth

Realising My Mistake

WHY DID I ABANDON MY home? I shall answer this question clearly. It was because I was deluded by desire and had taken leave of my senses. Society has made arrangements to control the natural physical urges that arise within us because of our bodies by using the ritual of marriage. When young girls and boys are kept engaged in appropriate education and given the company of people of virtue, they are protected from the sensual impulses of youth. But these are the very elements that our society lacks today, which is why an untamed lasciviousness erupts at an untimely juncture in young bodies and minds.

As for me, I have received neither an appropriate education nor the company of people of virtue. Because of my school education, all I have learnt to read are books lacking in seriousness—I only read poetry and novels and stories. They excited my imagination to encourage my depraved passions. No one ever gave me books of piety that induced religious devotion in me, that taught me self-restraint. Whatever entertainment I amused myself with was of a low order. The singing and dancing of theatre and the images from films did nothing to stimulate suitable thoughts. It is dangerous for the young to attempt to learn from these. Just as an infant who is fed fish immediately on growing its first teeth is condemned to choke on fish bones and die, so too are the young women and men of this land being led towards their death by going to the theatre and reading novels. I say this from my own experience; I am certain that others in my situation will testify in my support.

By the time I was in the Second Class, I felt I knew a great deal already. I had read much of the young novelists' works; thanks to Mukul-dada in particular, I had also studied some Shelley, Byron, Shakespeare, Vidyapati,

Bharatchandra, Vidyasagar, Bankim, Dinabandhu, Girish Chandra and Rabindranath. No wonder, therefore, that I was bloated with pride.

Those who inhabit only a world of their imagination do not develop an understanding of the harsh realities of life. Poets and novelists belong to this category. They play only with thoughts, but do not risk action. This was the condition Mukul-dada's teaching had left me in. When it came to the real world, I discovered that the way I had imagined it through the medium of novels and poetry was completely untrue.

I was fifteen years old when I left home. Had I considered myself unintelligent and helpless at that age, had I believed that I knew nothing of the world, had I been frightened at every step, I would never have been able to do what I did. It was false arrogance that made me reckless and shortsighted. Today I feel that suitable guardianship would have done me a world of good; I have now realised the necessity of dependence even within independence.

I had expected all obstacles to melt away as soon as I left home, allowing me to fulfil my desires to the fullest extent. But we discovered a dire situation on reaching Delhi—we would have to hide from the police. From people to places, everything was unfamiliar in a new city. We were Bengalis in an alien land—where were we to go, what were we to eat? Would I survive without worrying when Ramesh-dada went out? So many problems, so many difficulties. It was far easier at home. I had much more freedom there—why, I even had more opportunities for secret trysts with Ramesh-dada.

Of course, the power of money can overcome any barrier, but did Ramesh-dada have so much money at his disposal? I had brought none from home, and he had two and a half thousand rupees. How long would it last us if we could not augment it? No matter which city we were in, we had to live in style in a luxury hotel. I needed clothes and some jewellery, a young servant boy too. Surely we were not going to live like hermits on

frugal meals. Our lives were meant for pleasure, silver was its primary ingredient.

A week passed in Delhi; from Mukul-dada's letter I learnt that my father had started investigations into my whereabouts, though he had not informed the police. There was great suspicion about Ramesh-dada; enquiries were being made at his office and home. Kamala was mortified.

We went from Delhi to Lahore. Ramesh-dada had not even been employed for an entire year. How had he secured leave of absence for four months? It had never occurred to me to ask.

No poem or novel will reveal how much leave is available after a particular period of employment, or what the practices of different organisations are. I was under the impression clerks could get leave whenever they wanted.

We had travelled on the second class by train. At Burdwan, Ramesh-dada had opened the suitcase and laid out five bundles of currency notes in front of me, saying, 'This is what we have to live on, Maanu.' I counted a hundred ₹5 notes in each bundle, and did not stop to ask where he had got these two and a half thousand rupees from. At ₹200 a month, even a year's salary does not amount to ₹2,500. Perhaps Ramesh-dada had a rich father, whose money he was demolishing. But that was not the case either. He had, after all, had to beg my father to get him a job, and had even stayed in our house for a month because he did not have enough money.

But none of this had occurred to me at the time, for the devil who has invented sensual desire ensures that we remember none of this. Like a couple united by marriage sans family or witnesses, or like a mythical kinnar mithun pair, we were soaring in the sky—our feet could scarcely touch the ground.

From Lahore we travelled to Amritsar, where we spent three days before leaving for Kashmir. We stayed for nearly a month in Srinagar. As everyone

knows, the natural beauty of Kashmir is divine; our newfound love flooded over.

The next destination was Bombay. With the earlier dangers averted, my fears receded gradually. The police was no longer a threat. Ramesh-dada was an alert and cunning man; although I knew from Mukul-dada's letter that my father had not lodged a complaint with the police, still he made it a point to strike up an acquaintance with police officers wherever he went. His intent was to sniff out news of an arrest warrant in advance so that he could disappear in time.

Even in the lower classes in school I had become quite proficient in English. Mukul-dada's tutoring and Ramesh-dada's company had improved my skills.

We used to live like westerners in hotels, where I dressed like Parsi women. The English language had become especially useful when mingling with other guests. I learnt the western ways of dining and of conducting myself quickly, although I used to be perturbed about it at first. Ramesh-dada said, 'Look Maanu, if you Bengali girls go to Punjab and say, oh god where have I come, if people from Bombay cannot adjust to food and life in Bengal, if Madrasis consider Ayodhya a foreign land, how will we ever have nationalism in this country?'

I said, 'India is an immensely large country, with so much variety and so many differences in language and religion and social practices that I think it is impossible to create a single nation here.' Ramesh-dada said with great emphasis, 'The impossible must be made possible.' This is a quality I have observed in him—wherever he went, he considered it his own land, not just in his thoughts but also with his actions.

We had visited many of the historical and holy sites in Delhi and Lahore, in Srinagar and Bombay, during our stay in those cities. This helped purge my mental perversities to some extent, with my restlessness being replaced by tranquillity. Ramesh-dada breathed a sigh of relief.

We had stopped at Dwarka and Rajputana en route to Bombay from Srinagar. Our visits to places like Pushkar, Bharatpur, Jaipur, and Chittor gave rise to a miraculous calmness in my heart. I forgot all about my home and my father. Once, I had wanted to visit these places with him, but he had preferred to travel with my stepmother instead. Today my wishes were fulfilled thanks to Ramesh-dada's munificence. When we walked I used to hold his hand, and when we rode in a car I would sit with my arm around him. I cannot describe the waves of delight that flowed between our hearts as we bounced over the uneven roads in our vehicle with its faulty springs. I was filled with not just love but also gratitude for Ramesh-dada.

As we passed Haldighat, Ramesh-dada told me, 'This is India's Thermopylae, where fifteen thousand Rajputs lay down their lives for the nation. We have forgotten their glorious courage.' Sighing, he blew out cigar smoke. I had watched a performance of D.L. Roy's *Rana Pratap* on stage. 'Such unshakeable resolve, such extreme renunciation—who else could have made such a rare sacrifice to free their motherland of the chain of slavery? We cannot even imagine such high idealism.'

We saw the place where Padmini did her jauhar. Everyone present had their heads bowed and the palms joined, and I did the same, my heart fluttering. My arms lost all sensation, and I was about to fall. Clutching Ramesh-dada, who was standing by my side, I said, 'Let's go.'

I do not know what blessings that the purest among women showered on me from heaven, but I feel today that had the ideal of chastity that Padmini represents not existed on our land, a shining beacon for human society would have been missing. I had read of a chaste wife entering the fire in the Puranas, and now I had seen the holy spot where so many chaste women had sacrificed their lives in a blaze of glory. I realised that the flames had not incinerated Padmini's body, they had only burnt the sinful aggressor's obscene desire to ashes.

One evening we were taking the breeze in Malabar Hills in Bombay. We were strolling after letting the taxi go. I was miserable that evening, for reasons I will explain later. I had taken a siesta after lunch, while Ramesh-dada was reading the newspaper. We had not spoken much. When he saw me looking downcast, he decided we should go out. The beautiful sights outside restored my cheerfulness to some extent. Saying, ‘Well Maanu, did we leave our home and families only for me to see you looking so doleful? What is the matter?’ Putting his left arm around me, he gave me a good shake. I laid my head on his chest, feeling tearful. He held my chin and looked at me, noticing my moist eyes. At once he used a handkerchief to wipe my tears away, its mild fragrance delighting my senses. We sat down on a bench nearby.

‘I have given up everyone for you, Maanu,’ he said, ‘I have forgotten my wife, my widowed mother, my younger brothers and sisters, all for you. Are you too going to forsake me now? Do the dangers I have defied to be with you not tell you how much I love you?’ Ramesh-dada held me close to his breast. I could not savour his caresses today; I gazed at the darkness stretching out in front of us. My hands were clasped in my lap; Ramesh-dada took my right arm and placed it around his own shoulder. I was embarrassed to think I was ignoring him.

Silence reigned, with the occasional car holding sophisticated people passing by with low sounds along the wide Malabar Hill street. Ramesh-dada said, ‘Why are you so quiet, what’s wrong?’

I said, ‘Nothing at all. You must have seen what Kamala wrote today.’ I tightened the hold of my arm around him.

Lighting a cigarette, he said, ‘Are you missing home? Such a little girl.’ Exhaling a mouthful of smoke, he said, ‘Can you tell me what makes you miss home? Don’t mind my saying this, but I am telling you the truth; you have no mother at home, nor brothers or sisters. Your father is enjoying himself with his sixteen-year-old second wife—he does not even spare a

glance for his daughter. He has manoeuvred you out of the bedroom, he has even discarded your mother's portrait. What joys lie in wait for you over there?'

I would have given a different answer had Ramesh-dada told me the same thing today. But at that time I had told myself: 'Forgive me, Ramesh-dada, I have indeed escaped the desert and discovered life-giving water. I do not need to see what you have forsaken for me, I only have eyes for the offering of love you have laid out in front of me.'

We took a taxi that evening to the cinema. My happiness returned, I asked myself why I was adding to the burden of my anxiety—which fool was it who refused a cup of nectar?

The letter from Kamala that I referred to earlier said that she had met my father, who was heartbroken because of me. He was neither going to inform the police nor lodge a case. My stepmother was weeping for me. Harimati was ecstatic at her predictions having come true, and was telling neighbours, 'I knew all along.' Nanda-dada had stopped going to school; he was saying, 'I *will* find Maanu somehow or the other.' Kamala's mother had acquiesced to her marrying Mukul-dada. There was no news of Ramesh-dada's family.

I was deeply saddened by this letter. My stepmother was a good person, who loved me but had never been able to express herself. She was not the kind of sly woman who resorted to subterfuge to win her husband's heart; she was a simple soul who usually followed my father's orders. I felt a pang of sadness for her, and of remorse for Nanda-dada, whose carelessness had allowed me to escape, for which my father must have chided him. That was probably why he had forsaken his studies and pledged to find me. I felt an occasional impulse to give myself up to honour his valour.

From Bombay we travelled to Madras, via Nagpur. After spending some time there, we moved to Vishakhapatnam, followed by Waltair. Because I found the coastal area particularly pleasing, we stayed there for two months.

After this we travelled to Puri and then to Kashi, where there were no small number of Bengalis. Going out inevitably meant running into them. I was constantly worried about meeting someone who knew me and being found out.

One day I told Ramesh-dada, ‘Let’s go away from here. Bengalis everywhere, what if someone recognises you or me, we’ll be in trouble.’ Putting his legs up on the extended arms of his easy-chair and puffing at his cigar without a care in the world, he said, ‘This man is not guided by female reasoning. Did you know that the majority of Bengalis in Kashi are on your Ramesh-dada’s side? Some are here with wives of other men, some to arrange for abortions for widows, some for a change of air for their mistresses—and then there are some who have put their own relatives to sinful work. There are three places to which the scandals of Bengal escape—Nabadweep, Kashi and Vrindavan. Who are you afraid of? Who’s going to be your judge? They are competing with one another. A fallen woman humiliated by the masses had turned to Jesus Christ for protection. He told the people gathered there, let he amongst you who is without sin cast the first stone. No one stepped forward. It says so in the Bible, remember?’

I said, ‘Yes, I do. You, of course, see a Kashi or a Vrindavan or a Nabadweep in your own image, why would you see the piety? Be that as it may, I still want to go. There is no need to stay here too long.’

We visited Allahabad and Agra on our way to Mathura. At Prayag we bathed at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, and spent five days in Agra to view the Taj Mahal, the Agra Fort and Akbar’s tomb at Sikandra. After some five months of travel, we finally arrived at Mathura, early in the month of Ashadh, with the intention of staying there for a longer period. I did not realise then why Ramesh-dada had chosen Mathura of all the cities in India.

We found a decent house at a reasonable rate in Swami Ghat, near the Yamuna.

There was, in fact, a hotel in the European style near the cantonment, but Ramesh-dada did not appear willing to stay there. We were running out of money, such indulgences were no longer feasible. ‘In Mathura it’s best to live the Indian way.’ He abandoned his coat and trousers and tie and hat. I did not have Western garments, but I substituted my ankle-high shoes for nagrais. A cook was appointed, and so was a servant, for buying food, fetching water, and doing the dishes.

One day I discovered that Ramesh-dada had shaved his moustache off. ‘What’s all this, Ramesh-dada,’ I said, ‘you’re not looking handsome anymore.’

He said, ‘Don’t worry, it’ll grow back.’

It could have ended as a joke, but it did not. Soon afterwards he sent for a barber and had his head shaved, leaving only a few tufts of hair. I began to suspect he was up to something. Then when he put lines of sandalwood paste on his forehead and nose, wrapped his dhoti around himself in a new way, and put on Madrasi shoes to turn into a Dravidian priest, it became obvious to me that Ramesh-dada was trying to hide his identity. I did not say anything explicitly, however, and we laughed it off.

Ramesh-dada had learnt to speak in Tamil when in Rangoon; I was astonished when he conversed in that language with the priest at the Rangaji temple in Vrindavan. He used to get letters addressed to Ramswarup Iyer. We had, of course, stayed under assumed names in every city we had been to, but this time Ramesh-dada appeared to be employing even more caution than usual. He did not tell me anything at all about it.

He had got into the practice of drinking with his friends in Calcutta, which I was not aware of. But in the European hotels we stayed in, his consumption of alcohol was not only obvious but also not moderate. Once he requested me to have a drink too, but I refused, saying, ‘Certainly not in my current state of health.’

Ramesh-dada said, ‘But it is still six months away, why not enjoy yourself now? In any case, what do you suppose the vinum galicia that they give you after childbirth really is? Pure X No 1.’ Ramesh-dada would have a drink or two every day, a smell that I had become accustomed to. I even had to pour from the bottle for him sometimes.

The great war was underway in Europe, and the Mathura cantonment was full of British soldiers. Arrangements had been made for their food and drink. Ramesh-dada said, ‘I’m going towards the cantonment, Maanu, let me see if I can get a bottle of fine liquor. You can’t get anything in this town, all they care about are bhang and shiddhi.’ Ramesh-dada went out, leaving me alone at home.

The servant handed me a letter—it was from Kamala. I was thunderstruck on reading it. Ramesh-dada had embezzled three thousand rupees from his employers; he had lied about getting four months’ leave. The company had lodged a complaint with the police, and an arrest warrant had been issued. There was another complaint, of abducting me—not from my father, but from my uncle, Nanda-dada’s father. The police had already made enquiries at our house, Mukul-dada’s house, Kamala’s house, and Ramesh-dada’s boarding house and family home. They had got Ramesh-dada’s address in Bombay and Kashi from Kamala and Mukul-dada. The detective police was on his trail.

I began to tremble with fear, after which I felt an inhuman rage and hatred for Ramesh-dada. He had taken advantage of my gullibility to deceive me. I had loved him with all my life. I had trusted him, and this was the vile way he had responded. I was silent with loathing.

Ramesh-dada returned in the evening—his eyes made it evident he was inebriated. I said sternly, ‘You said you were on four months’ leave, Ramesh-dada, but one more month has gone by after that, and yet…’ Before I could finish Ramesh-dada said, his speech slurring, ‘Do I have to explain that to you? Are you my master?’

I said, ‘I do not ask for an explanation, but you can tell me the reason.’

Ramesh-dada said, ‘I have applied for three more months of leave. Does this dispel your suspicion?’

I replied, ‘It’s not a question of suspicion, Ramesh-dada, you know we have run out of money. We will not survive another week. Even if you do not return to Calcutta, can you not send for your salary for this period of leave? That will amount to eight hundred rupees, at least.’

Ramesh said, ‘You need not worry about that. Give me my cigarettes and matches.’

Complying with his orders, I said, ‘Ramesh-dada, you can see the state I’m in. I’m afraid of not being in a proper city with good doctors or maternity homes. That will need money too.’

Ramesh-dada staggered to the bed. Smoking, he said, ‘Money is not a problem, Maanu. You saw I had two and a half thousand.’ He began to cough and it seemed like he was about to vomit. Placing a bowl in front of him, I said, ‘Not two and a half, but three thousand.’ His eyes began to bulge, and his nausea disappeared.

‘I know how you got your three thousand, Ramesh-dada. I do not want a single paise of such income. If you can, make money honestly and keep me with you—don’t go astray on the path of theft and fraud, and don’t make me go astray either.’

Ramesh-dada continued speaking in a drunken haze, ‘I have given up everything and everyone for you, Maanu, and now you’re calling me a thief? Whom did I steal for—whom did I leave my wife, my mother for? For whom am I halfway to gaol? Damn it, there’s not a single soul in this world who understands, who can value my love. Let me tell you, no one can be a lover without being a thief; Mathura is living proof of this. Very well, you can stay here as an honest woman, I’m off.’

Swaying on his feet, Ramesh-dada stood up, and put on his clothes and shoes. What was happening? Was he really going? I ran up and threw

myself at his feet. ‘Don’t leave me, Ramesh-dada, I was wrong, forgive me. Don’t cast me adrift this way.’

Kicking me away, Ramesh-dada screamed in anger, ‘Shut up you she-devil, not another word from you. You can remain here with your morals.’ He was on the verge of tumbling to the floor in drunkenness; quickly I guided him into bed and fanned him.

A little later he began to vomit, soaking the bed and floor. The room filled with a fetid stench. The cook and the servant refused to go anywhere near him, so it was up to me to get buckets of water and clean up after him. No one ate that night. In the early hours of the morning, Ramesh-dada began to perspire profusely, after which his body went cold. I was terribly frightened, and could not sleep at all that night out of fear and anxiety.

Ramesh-dada came to his senses at nine in the morning. I gave him a bath and made him some hot cocoa with milk. He read Kamala’s letter carefully and realised that things had become serious.

Clouds had gathered in the blue sky of our love. Trust made way for suspicion. I began to consider Ramesh-dada from a new perspective, as the different sides of his personality became clear to me—debauchee, embezzler, traitor, liar, drunkard.

Chapter the Fifth

On the Road to Sin

AFTER THIS I KEPT GETTING into altercations with Ramesh-dada over the minutest of things. All the cash we had, had been spent; Mukul-dada had sent fifty rupees on my writing to him—he had gone to great difficulties to collect the money, for he was, after all, a poorly paid teacher. Ramesh-dada had squandered twenty-eight out of the fifty rupees on drinking. This is how adverse fortune strikes. The cook had left as he was not being paid; I did the cooking two times a day. I did not know how to cook, I had never learnt. Unwell as I was, the heat and smoke all but killed me.

I asked Ramesh-dada to look for a job in Mathura, but he paid no attention. He sold the expensive winter suit he had in exchange for a little money. Soon he sold my jewellery too. I had concealed the necklace that my stepmother had given me on my birthday; this transgression earned me harsh words and a beating. Slaps and kicks came my way on any pretext these days; I could only weep as I tolerated it all.

‘Write to Kamala for some money,’ Ramesh-dada told me. ‘Hers is a poor family, where is she to get any?’ I said. He was furious with me; so I had no choice but to write to Kamala, who sent twenty rupees. We ran out of it soon.

A few of my ornaments and costly garments were still with me. Ramesh-dada used his wiles to get me to part with them so that he could sell them. The gold necklace was the only thing I had not handed over yet. One day he told me, ‘I have got a job as a professor at the Prem College in Vrindavan. I have met Raja Mahendra Pratap, he is fiercely opposed to the British government. So am I, as you know. The Raja was very pleased to know this, he will give me a salary of one hundred rupees a month.’ I was ecstatic on hearing this.

Looking worried, Ramesh-dada said, ‘A new suit of clothes is necessary, but there is no money.’

I said, ‘Pawn my gold necklace for the money, you can redeem it when you get the first month’s salary.’

Turning away, Ramesh-dada said solemnly, ‘No, that’s impossible, it’s a gift of love from your stepmother.’ I realised that this was an expression of pique and sarcasm over the events of the other day. Unlocking my jewellery box, I tossed the necklace into his lap. The one hundred and fifty rupees that came from pawning it went on Ramesh-dada’s own expenses; the suit of clothes he was meant to get for his new job as a professor did not materialise.

I began to suspect that he was lying about the job, that his intention was to relieve me of my only remaining possession so as to pay for his drinking. ‘When will you start teaching?’ I asked him one day. Slyly he replied, ‘Raja Mahendra Pratap has had to leave Vrindavan unexpectedly, the government has issued a warrant for his arrest. This is posing a problem.’ Lest I doubt his word, he quickly read out a report about Raja Mahendra Pratap from *The Hindu* newspaper.

The Jhulan festival had begun in Mathura and Vrindavan. ‘Can we visit the Dwarkadheesh temple?’ I asked Ramesh-dada. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I do not feel well. Take Lachhman.’ Lachhman was our servant. I left, leaving Ramesh-dada behind at home.

The temples of Mathura had a festive air on the occasion, nowhere more so than at the Dwarkadheesh temple. The idol was placed on a gigantic throne of gold and silver, and the entire temple was decorated beautifully with lights, flowers and bunting, while a group of singers performed devotional songs melodiously. The sights and sounds brought great peace to the heart even in adverse and desperate times.

We returned home at about nine at night after watching the rituals at Bisramghat and the jhulan celebrations at two or three other temples. I

found Ramesh-dada missing, and the lights switched on. A letter lay on the bed. It said something along these lines:

> ‘I can no longer live with you, Maanu. You have begun to despise me as an embezzler, a debauchee, a drunkard. There is no room for love where hatred and suspicion reign. I can shed the slur on my name if I return the three thousand rupees to the cashbox—I can walk around in society with my head held high even if I lure a dozen more girls out of their homes; and as for drinking, why, it’s the sign of a rich man. You do not understand your own best interests, there is no future for you. I shall see what protection your newly aroused ethics leave you with. I am leaving—do not come looking for me. The police is pursuing me. Leave this house immediately.’

Suddenly I felt as though a load the size of a mountain had been lifted off me. I was about to drown, but now I was able to lift my head clear of the water and breathe. This was how intolerable Ramesh-dada’s behaviour had become. I had wanted freedom; god seemed to have opened the doors for me.

I did not eat that evening, and late at night, anxieties assailed me. Where should I go now, what should I do—I could not afford to be weak-willed. The night passed without sleep. When I looked around in the morning I experienced a twinge of sadness for Ramesh-dada. Instead of making a cup of tea, I called Lachhman and said, ‘I have to go to Vrindavan, please get me a carriage.’

All I had left of my jewellery were two sets of gold bangles and one pair of earrings. Selling these, I cleared the servant’s dues of three months of salary, with some money left over. A letter arrived from Kamala, in which she had written, ‘You made a mistake in running away with Ramesh-babu. In love affairs like these the consummation comes quickly, but so does separation. There was no particular obstacle to your marriage, your father might not have objected either. There is still time to come back and correct your error.’

I did not care for Kamala’s advice, and did not respond to her letter either. Moving to Vrindavan, I hired a small house near Seva Kunj. There

were several Bengalis living nearby, most of them widows of advanced years. ‘My husband and mother-in-law died of cholera when we were living in Mathura,’ I told them. ‘I have written to my family.’ Everyone expressed sympathy.

A month later I gave up this house for one near Bansighat. I was almost out of money; I also had a bout of fever for ten days. Begging would have ensured I had enough to eat, but I was too weak to move.

Two days went by without food. I did not know the art of begging. I lay on the street near Bansighat, telling myself that death alone could release me now. A kind-hearted Bengali gentleman who was passing by saw my plight and took me to the hermitage of a sage whose disciple he was. The mahant there had a large establishment, filled with idols of deities and disciples and followers who served him. A Bengali, he was nearly sixty-five, with matted hair, a beard running down to his chest, and his body covered in sandalwood paste and ashes. When he saw me, he asked his disciple, ‘Why have you brought her? She is pregnant. She must have run away on the incitement of an evil man who has now abandoned her. She has much misery lying in store. Very well, give her a little prasad.’

When I had recovered a bit, he told me, ‘We are not allowed to let women stay at this hermitage, ma. Especially you, you are with child, there are grave risks. What do you want to do?’ I burst into tears, clutched his feet and said, ‘I am a sinner, baba, save me. You know everything in my heart and mind.’

He said, ‘Yes, I do. I even know what you do not know about yourself. This repentance is short-lived and insincere. Once carnal desires have taken root in your heart, there is no escape from them. Suffering, poverty, or illness can temporarily halt the growth of the tree of sin, but it drops new seeds whenever the conditions become favourable again. Nothing but the mercy of god can enable this temptation to be conquered. This requires unrelenting penance.’

My voice choking with tears, I said, ‘Forgive me, give me shelter.’ Affectionately the mahant said, ‘Ma, you will get plenty of kindness in the form of clothes and food, there is no dearth of such compassion in this world. You are under attack at present, not from poverty but from your irresistible proclivities. You are not seeking the shelter that will protect you from this invasion, what you wish for are food, clothing and shelter. Tell me, would you like to go back home?’

When I acquiesced, he took down by father’s name and address. Sending for one of his disciples, he said, ‘Write a letter to Calcutta. Ramkishen lives with his wife and two children in the garden next to the hermitage. This woman will stay with them. Make all the arrangements.’ When the disciple left, he told me, ‘I doubt whether your father will accept you back. He has to follow the dictates of society, after all. Succumbing to temptation and sin is a spiritual illness; the soul cannot turn to god until it is cleansed by penance.’

I was now living with Ramkishen’s family in the garden next to the hermitage, which Ramkishen looked after. My daily duties included cleaning the cowshed, feeding the three cows and their calves, filling a dozen pitchers at the well and bringing them to the garden, washing the utensils used to cook for the deities, cleaning up after the sadhus had eaten, and grinding the wheat for my own meals. I used to perform all of these tasks happily, but they felt like very hard work. My hair had been cropped closely at the mahant’s instructions. I had been given permission to enter the temple only during the morning prayers. The mahant would talk to me, as needed, when he walked in the garden.

A letter arrived from my father a month later. In it, he had informed the mahant that he would be unable to accept me, that he considered a daughter like me dead. I did not have the mental capacity to argue, my mind and body were both weakened. Today, however, I can contradict my father. Shortly before I began writing this memoir I went to Vrindavan, on the

occasion of jhulan. There I met the mahant once again, a meeting whose account I shall provide where appropriate. What I had told him then was, ‘I am a grave sinner, babaji, society has no place for me, my father has forsaken me. But you know of the men who have sold their honour and prestige, their wealth and assets, their bodies and their souls, at the feet of women like me, look, society has given them the choicest of positions. They are extolled as poets and writers, renowned as politicians and patriots, respected as the rich and the noble. There are even some sages and priests who have become gurus to the populace, about whom society maintains a studied silence. Nothing comes between them and positions of power in courts and councils and corporations and religious establishments. And we have been burning in the fire of hell because of one mistake made in the ignorance of adolescence. This is how your society metes out justice.’

Three months passed. One day, Ramkishen told the mahant when he visited the garden, ‘She’s a pregnant woman, baba, what if the child comes to some harm from all the hard work she’s doing?’

I was nearby, making dung cakes. The mahant said, ‘Do you imagine the child is alive? Somehow it has to be delivered, that is all. She will fall ill unless she works hard.’ Ramkishen was astonished. The mahant said, ‘She has contracted an ugly disease. When aroused by desire we forget the primary rules of health.’

In due course, I delivered a dead boy child. Ramkishen’s wife devoted herself to taking care of me; I shall always remember the uncomplicated, uneducated farmer woman’s maternal love. I enquired after her when I went back to Vrindavan some time later, but I was told that she had died eight months earlier.

I developed several illnesses after the delivery. I could not eat anything, and ran up a low fever every evening, accompanied by stomach ailments. The mahant made arrangements for my treatment to the best of his abilities. I recovered to some extent after four months of illness. One night, during

this period, I was writhing in pain with a headache, when I felt as though I was in my bed in my Calcutta home, with my mother stroking my brow lightly. In my delirium, I said, ‘Take me to the theatre, ma.’ She said, ‘No, you’re too young.’ Then someone fetched her, and she left me. ‘Take me with you, ma,’ I screamed—Ramkishen’s wife ran in to hear me crying and pleading with my mother.

I told the mahant of this dream, who responded, ‘You will have to suffer more.’ I asked to be indoctrinated into his order, but he said, ‘I cannot overrule destiny, ma. It is not yet time.’

Six or seven more months passed; I had now been living in the hermitage for nearly a year. My health was better, and I was able to resume physical work. Some of the mahant’s disciples would appear in the garden at specific hours to collect fruits and vegetables to be cooked for the deities. From a distance the mahant had observed my seductive glances at one of them in the course of conversation. Although I was physically attracted to him, he was pure of disposition. Still, he was no longer sent to the garden.

Writing a long love letter to him, I entered the hermitage one day at about two in the afternoon with the intention of handing it over. I was aware that the mahant was deep in meditation at this hour. As I stood beneath a tree, waiting, I suddenly discovered the mahant walking towards me. I was petrified. He said, ‘Why are you here at this hour? This is not the right time for you to be at the hermitage.’ Without hesitation I said, ‘One of the calves ran in here.’ The mahant pointed to the gate with his finger, saying gravely, ‘Go outside, there is no calf here. Even if there is, it is Ramkishen’s responsibility, not yours.’

The mahant sent for me the very next day. I approached him fearfully. Another middle-aged Bengali man was sitting nearby; the mahant said, ‘You must go to Calcutta at once with this gentleman. He will make arrangements for you.’ I was pleased.

The mahant had been a highly placed officer before his renunciation; many of his friends and former associates would visit him in Vrindavan to discuss matters of religion and spirituality. The gentleman with whom I travelled to Calcutta was a friend of his. I stayed in his house for ten days.

Somewhere on the outskirts of Calcutta, a gentleman named _____* Das had established an institution for rescued women. A lawyer by profession, he was renowned as a social worker too. The mahant's friend had taken me there; for he was well-acquainted with Mr Das.

One episode of my life had ended. My father's neglect, a poor education and bad company had led me to the path of sin. I had never learnt self-restraint, I had only added fuel to the fire of my tendencies. Reading novels had planted in me the urge to rebel—the thrill of action had diverted me from the outcome.

Among women like us, those who have gone astray because of illicit love affairs with married men inevitably meet this fate. The man takes his pleasure with the helpless girl, ruining her life, and soon leaves her. There is not a single wayward woman who has lived with her first lover till her death. I shall elucidate the logical reason for this, delving into my own experience.

Illegitimate love is always born out of passion. But passion is by nature short-lived, and not the result of discernment. Therefore, a love that arises swiftly ends swiftly too. The reason for the separation of a man and a woman engaged in such illicit love is either a character flaw in one or both of them, or adverse circumstances. Poverty, pregnancy, and loss of beauty count as adverse circumstances, while alcoholism and attraction to other women or men are character flaws.

Both of these materialised in our lives. Ramesh-dada's drinking and my untimely pregnancy caused our separation. Had Ramesh-dada married me according to Hindu rites, he would never have been able to abandon me. Even if he was not concerned with personal embarrassment or social norms,

he would at least have been afraid of the law. An illicit affair provides as much freedom for separation as it does for union. So Ramesh-dada found it easy to leave me. Society will extol his virtues, while I face condemnation. Ramesh-dada did show me the truth eventually.

But I did not learn my lesson despite all the suffering. Even in the most pious of environments at the mahant's hermitage, the seeds of carnality were sown once again in my heart. The temptation of the devil reappeared with the promise of the pleasures of paradise. I was bewitched once more.

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*The author chose to protect the identity of many of her clients and men of high social standing by not revealing their full names.

Chapter the Sixth

Selling My Body

WOMEN WHO WISHED TO MEND their shameful ways and live in purity were given place in this rescue institution. They would take up some kind of craft to sustain themselves. And then there were women who had been forced by circumstances to be here. Their situations were similar to mine, which made it impossible for them to go back to their families or to society. Their lives were unsettled; it did not appear to me that they were content with securing food and clothing here in this institution. All of them were adolescents or young women. When I went there, there were some thirteen or fourteen women present, of whom everyone, barring four or five middle-aged widows, were of the kind I mentioned.

I was beginning to understand that for the women who had left home either of their own free will or at the incitement of evil men, a lack of food and clothing was not the primary danger. Rather than ‘where will my next meal come from’, their main worry was ‘how will I survive’. In the city of Calcutta women could be engaged in various businesses and jobs, which could secure enough money for food, clothing, and shelter. But I have observed that even among those women who have found employment or set up their own business enterprises, many have chosen to walk the same path that I did. The reason is that they have never experienced the constraints of married life. Paan-sellers, maids at homes or at boarding houses, fish- or vegetable-sellers in the markets, cooks, factory workers, spice-grinders, stage actresses, devotional singers, nurses, music teachers, midwives, doctors, railway ticket counter clerks, telephone operators—all of them are capable of earning sufficiently to ensure a livelihood for themselves, and, if they wish, of living a pure life. But my experience tells me this is not what happens all the time.

I had concealed my father’s identity and address to the authorities at the rescue institution. All that they came to know was that I was the daughter of a high-born Brahmin, and that an evil man had lured me out of my home before abandoning me when I became pregnant. I did not reveal Ramesh-dada’s name either; it was known, however, that I had received some education.

I had been rather desirous of returning to Calcutta from Vrindavan, for I had hopes of meeting, if not anyone else, at least Mukul-dada and Kamala. These two friends were rafts I could cling to in the bottomless ocean. But after entering the rescue institution I discovered that locating them would not be easy.

Soon I developed an intimacy with several young women of my age, Rajbala and Kalidasi being principal among them. Since they will be referred to again in this book, let me provide an introduction. Rajbala comes from a family of gold traders who lived in Calcutta; she had got married young. Both her father and father-in-law were wealthy, but by a sad stroke of providence, she had become a widow within a year of being married. After this she had entered into a clandestine affair with a young man of the Kayastha caste from East Bengal. The wife of one of Rajbala’s elder brothers had helped her in secret. The young man in question had *Bande Mataram* on his lips all the time during the heyday of the freedom movement. Their liaison continued for three years, concealed from everyone. Eventually Rajbala became pregnant, and the young man made good his escape. Rajbala left her house with her maid on the pretext on going to bathe in the river, and never went back. After this, she was whirled about on the currents of much misery and suffering before arriving at this rescue institution.

As for Kalidasi, she was a blacksmith’s daughter, and pretty. Her husband’s family was from a village somewhere in Burdwan. Miscreants abducted her by force from her husband and for a year took her wherever

they went. The matter went to the courts, but Kalidasi's husband did not accept her afterwards. On the advice of a relative, she was about to enter prostitution, but a lawyer from Burdwan happened to find out and despatched her here.

Gradually I realised that the rescue institution was not safe for us. There was no suffering on account of food or clothing, but some of the authorities paid special attention to those among us who were beautiful and attractive. It was not long before their benediction turned towards me. I did not have to perform any of the chores, and my room began to fill up with myriad furniture. I was exceedingly pleased, as my wardrobe acquired excellent outer garments and expensive inner ones, not to mention fine bed linen. Some of the other women were envious of me because of this. Rajbala and Kalidasi would chuckle whenever they ran into me. 'Your luck has turned,' they would say.

One of the authorities was particularly attracted to me, and I too gave in. He would spend the night in my room sometimes. From him I learnt that some of the other members of the administration also visited my women friends' rooms in secret. Some time passed this way.

I proposed marriage to my secret lover one day, but he refused. The women of my age would sometimes gather together to laugh about our secret love affairs. Rajbala, Kalidasi and I would open our hearts to one another; on my advice, both of them had sought marriage too, but to no avail.

I said, 'If we *are* going to sell our beauty and appeal, why should we do it like thieves, we should put ourselves out in the market, gauge the rate we can command and choose an appropriate price.' Rajbala and Kalidasi did not allow their lovers into their rooms from that very night onwards, and nor did I. We began to be tormented and persecuted after this, whereupon we decided not to stay on in the rescue institution. But we had no support or sanctuary; where were we to go?

The great war was raging in Europe at the time. A large number of women had travelled from India to the battlefield to provide care to injured soldiers, as a result of which there was a dearth of nurses in the hospitals in big cities like Calcutta and Bombay. We used to get a Bengali newspaper at our rescue institution, and I would often read the news out to the other women.

Rajbala had a brainwave. One day she told me, ‘Come, let us learn how to be nurses.’ I said, ‘How can we, unless the authorities here make arrangements for us?’ The next time Mr Ghosh came to inspect the institution, Rajbala brought the subject up with him. Pleased with the proposition, he engaged a doctor to give us some preliminary training. Since Kalidasi was not literate, the responsibility for teaching her to read and write was given to me. She made splendid progress in a mere three months. We were taken to the hospital sometimes, where we were taught the names of various instruments and medicines.

Our former secret lovers were giving us no respite; their oppression was making it unbearable for us. Faced with a horrifying attack, one of the women tried to jump into the building next door to save herself, and fractured her leg. It even led to a court case, but I did not learn of the outcome. One evening Rajbala, Kalidasi, another woman (whose name I forget, perhaps it was Khedi or something similar), and I hired a horse-drawn carriage and went to Tollygunge. From there we took a tram to the meditation temple of the Shadharon Brahmo Samaj on Cornwallis Street.

This was a place I was familiar with, for I had visited it often with my father in childhood. The memory brought tears to my eyes. The prayers had ended, and most of the worshippers who had gathered had left, with only a few eminent persons still there. We were wearing our saris the way Brahmo ladies do, and had slippers on as well. So we went up to them.

We had been planning a visit to the Brahmo Samaj for a long time, Rajbala being the primary force. She had told us that the Brahmo Samaj

accepted all and sundry, and converting to the Brahmo faith would make it simpler to get married. But what we discovered was that there were barriers here too.

A tall, powerfully built man of advancing years, with white hair and moustache and beard, was standing in front of us. ‘This I think is Krishna Kumar Mitra,’ Rajbala whispered to us. ‘Touch his feet.’ All four of us did; when he affectionately asked us the reason for our visit, we drew him aside and told him everything, requesting protection and sanctuary. We informed him of the abusive behaviour of the authorities at the rescue institution, and our desire to convert to the Brahmo faith.

He said, ‘I cannot take the decision to provide you shelter all on my own, it is necessary to consult the others in the Samaj.’ He beckoned to an elderly man, who, when told of everything, protested vehemently with particular loathing, ‘No, how will that be possible? They have tainted pasts. Shall we allow sin to enter the Brahmo Samaj?’ We left, disappointed, but not before touching Krishna Kumar Mitra’s feet again, which he allowed. But the other gentleman, whose name, we learnt afterwards, was Heramba-babu, jumped back, saying, ‘No, never.’ I had occasion to meet this gentleman subsequently, but I shall refrain from recounting the incident for it may cause him pain.

We began to wonder where to go now. The rescue institution was not going to accept us, not that we were inclined to go back. Suddenly I remembered Kamala. I knew her address, and felt confident of being able to stay there for one or two days. All four of us set off in a horse-drawn carriage to her house in Baghbazar.

But when we got there we discovered that Kamala had gone away somewhere with her mother, they no longer lived there. There was a new tenant, who could not tell me about Kamala and her mother’s whereabouts. It was as though I had been felled by a bolt of lightning. After all these years of suffering, I had been feeling joyful at the prospect of meeting my

childhood friend Kamala again after a long time—I had never imagined my hopes would be dashed this way. Plunging my head in my hands, I began to ponder.

I had forgotten Mukul-dada's address; I may have been able to secure it from Kamala, but would it be possible anymore? Rajbala said, 'I know a place where all of us can stay tonight. We can think about what to do in the morning.' We had no choice but to agree, for it was quite late at night.

Paying the driver of the carriage additional fare, we took shelter for the night at the house of a prostituted woman in Harkata Lane in Champatala. In her past life Rajbala used to know this woman. She had taken the entire building on rent and established a woman in prostitution in each room, and took some money from each of them. Her income came from this sinful path. Amongst prostituted women, those like her are referred to as the 'baariwali' or landlady (or, sometimes, 'maashi'). Everyone addressed this particular woman as Rani Baariwali.

The landlady was delighted to meet Rajbala after such a long time, and the three of us as well. With great care and attention she ushered us into a room which lacked for nothing by way of sleeping arrangements. Some food was served, and the landlady began a conversation with Rajbala on various subjects. I was too anxious to be calm; I was entering the room of a purely professional woman in prostitution for the first time, which made me experience a curious discomfort. The room was in a corner of the ground floor of the building, with no sunlight or fresh air. There was an unfamiliar stench everywhere, the vomit of drunkards, music and singing, shouts and screams, swearing and screaming—my heart sank looking at all of this. But even if I were to run away, I did not know where to go.

The next morning Khedi said she had an aunt in Beliaghata, she would go there. We did not object; she left. We remained in the same place for the next three of four days, during which time the landlady tried to persuade Kalidasi and me to enter prostitution too. I had no argument to offer this

cunning woman—the sum of her reasoning was: women in prostitution have freedom; why, after all, has god given them beauty and learning to enchant men with? So as to earn a living. The lawyer sells his intellect, the teacher sells his education, even the spiritual leader sells his incantations; why should alluring women not sell their bodies then? There are risks and dangers in every business. The eminent people of the country are all chained to the feet of prostituted women. Rich men's money wings its way to the homes of these women, just one of whose arch glances is worth a thousand rupees.

I succumbed. The landlady began looking for a room for me, while Kalidasi took a room in the same building. Rajbala and I rented two shanties with tiled roofs in a slum on Amherst Street, where City College stands now. Rani Baariwali lent both of us some money to buy all the things and clothes we needed.

Now I saw from a different perspective how bad company leads to moral downfall. I was on the verge of forgetting all that I had learnt in school. Every new subject that Mukul-dada had taught me, literature, history—all of it was buried. Those whose company I kept now did not care for learning or education. The primary subjects of discussion had to do with how many customers each of the women had, what their conversations with their lovers were about, and other vulgar matters. Besides, we had to do all our own cooking and household work. Too filled with shame to go to the market ourselves, we had someone else do it for us.

Prostituted women refer to their customers as 'babus'. I shall use this word from time to time. These babus were the subject of violent disputes. Were one woman's fixed customer to enter the room of another, it would lead to a bitter quarrel. Everyone else joined in, and I was no exception. I had even grown accustomed to all manner of obscenities—I realised that the scant education I had acquired in school had only served to hasten my

ruination by inflating my arrogance without being able to protect me from the onslaught of sinfulness.

In the evening we would dress up and stroll to the Thonthonia Kalibari on the pretext of viewing the prayer rituals. Whenever we noticed a man eyeing us, we would walk back homewards, making sure that he followed us. Rani Baariwali had taught us this trick for snaring our victims.

At first I would refuse to go for fear that I might run into someone from my father's house. What if Nanda-dada, or Harimati the maid, or my father's chauffeur, or even my father himself saw me? Rajbala would reassure me, 'Your house is a long way from here. No one in Calcutta cares for the goings-on in another neighbourhood, no one from one locality goes to another.' I accepted her reasoning, and eventually began accompanying her, though with caution. There was another hope I harboured, of catching a glimpse of Mukul-dada, for I recalled that he lived close by.

One winter night, on our way back from the Kali temple, we discovered a gentleman with his head wrapped in a shawl following us. When we reached our houses, he entered Rajbala's. The next morning she told me, 'Do you know who was in my house last night? You know that college near Baithakkhana Market? He's a senior professor there, his name is Mr _____. He's been to my room two or three times earlier too.' I was astonished to hear his name; I had heard Mukul-dada speak of him often. He taught very well; I decided to check whether I could get any news of Mukul-dada from this professor.

Rani Baariwali would visit us sometimes; we used to address her as Rani Mashi. Gradually my apprehensions died down, as I saw the other women engrossed in lives of revelry and entertainment, moving about freely, going to the river for a bath or to the temple with no fears at all. Why should you be afraid of anyone anymore? They asked me. Once you've told the government you have adopted this profession of your own free will, who is going to threaten you? A dancer cannot be coy.

Rani Mashi said, ‘Since your father considers you dead, since he will not accept you at home, and you aren’t seeking shelter from him either, why should you fear even your father?’ I said, ‘Still, would a father not be saddened if he saw his daughter in a shameful profession?’

Rani Mashi said, ‘He could easily save himself from this sadness by taking his daughter home. Since you have chosen this path, ma, you will see many new things. You *will* see a daughter plying her trade as a woman in prostitution in full view of her father. You *will* see a mother dressing up a girl born of her own womb every night to take in customers. You *will* see a prostituted woman’s family supporting themselves on her earnings. It is not just we women who have fallen—all of society has gone the same way.’

Rajbala and I were listening without responding. Rani Mashi continued, ‘For all you know, you might find your Nanda-dada knocking on your door one night. It could be your Mukul-dada too. Don’t be upset ma, I speak nothing but the plain truth. Nor is it beyond the realms of possibility for you to run into your own father in my room some day.’

Rajbala and I lowered our heads in embarrassment, while Rani Mashi went on, ‘What can I tell you, both of you have seen the woman who came to me from Rambagan the other day. Do you wish to hear her history? Her father’s name is Bhattacharya; he was a renowned professor at one of Calcutta’s colleges. Now in his old age after retirement, he is living out his days with the daughter of his own mistress in Rambagan because he has fallen in love with her. Such is the state of affairs. There is so much that I have seen and heard, and so will you.’

One day we saw a woman putting a garland around a picture in her room. She was older than us, but her beauty was still intact. ‘Whose picture is that?’ we asked her. She said it was a portrait of Shibnath Shastri’s, who had been one the principal acharyas of the Brahmo Samaj. In surprise I said, ‘Oh, Shibnath Shastri, we read his poem in school.’

I remembered hearing my father mention him from time to time. ‘Why do you have Shibnath Shastri’s picture in your room?’ I asked her. She said, ‘When I was seventeen or eighteen, a middle-aged woman in prostitution gave me shelter. She had two young sons; her babu had given her a house as a gift. The woman had taken me in with the motive of supporting herself with the money from selling my youth and beauty. She was the daughter of a Champatala carpenter, she had become a widow at the age of seven. Vidyasagar mohashoy and Shibnath Shastri had wanted to arrange a remarriage for her, but for various reasons this did not materialise. In her childhood she used to address Shibnath Shastri as “dada”. Eventually circumstances led her to prostitution. Shibnath Shastri visited her one day, after she had taken me under her wing, and advised her earnestly to abandon prostitution. But it was futile. Shortly before her death, however, she experienced remorse. I was in her house at the time; I used to address her as “ma”. She purchased this photograph at that time, and would adorn it with flowers every day and pray in front of it. Before dying she told me to do it as long as I live. Her sons occupied her house after her death and evicted me, which is why I live the way you see me now.’

I said, ‘Did not a noble soul like Shibnath Shastri feel revulsion at visiting a prostituted woman’s house to deliver her from evil?’

Bowing to the picture, she said, ‘He has restored many women in prostitution to living pure lives. I have been told how he rescued Lakshmimani, the daughter of a prostituted woman from Dhaka and arranged her marriage with a young Brahmo man.’

I said, ‘And look at the state of the Brahmo Samaj now. The other day we went there to join them voluntarily, but they did not accept us. Someone named Heramba-babu (later I learnt his name was Herambachandra Maitra) dismissed us as bad women and did not even allow us to touch his feet in respect. I believe Shibnath Shastri would not have allowed such treatment to be meted out to us had he been alive.’

Living in an unhealthy shanty made my health deteriorate steadily. On Rani Mashi's advice I used to take a pill to prevent myself from becoming pregnant—this led to a number of diseases. Rajbala used to take it too, but it did not affect her in any way. I became lean and weak, developing aches and pains all over my body. With ugly welts on the soles of my feet and sores across my face, Rani Mashi said my life would be in danger unless I was moved to a hospital.

I had given up all hope of survival; I would lie on my bed, weeping continuously, soaking the pillow with my tears. Falling ill on that occasion had convinced me that death was perhaps a happy outcome. I had no friends or family; the other women were busy with their own pursuits. When evening fell, everyone had to line up in front of their respective doors for business. After spending a night of passion without sleep but with alcohol, they would finally wake up at eight or nine in the morning. Which of them was going to look after me? We were like a herd of pigs rolling in the mud. I concluded that death was at hand.

Rani Mashi and Rajbala took me to the hospital. When I returned three months later after my recovery, I was penniless.

Chapter the Seventh

The Social Canvas

IN VRINDAVAN THE MAHANT HAD told me, ‘You will never lack for the kindness that gives you food and shelter.’ I have found repeated proof of the fact that he was right. It is not difficult to find salvation from poverty, but no one can protect you from the onslaught of your proclivities. Moreover, there is no dearth of people to push you into the jaws of this demoness.

Rani Mashi took me into her own house now, where a spacious room on the first floor had become available. What I did not realise then is that it is acts of kindness like these that effectively lead us to damnation.

Considering the education I had, I could have been a house tutor to children, or worked at the telephone office; I could have been a nurse or a music teacher too. But no one instilled in me the desire to make a living through such honest means, nor did they give me the opportunity. Instead, Rani Mashi provoked in me the immoral urge to parade my beauty and youth as wares.

I said, ‘My body is tarnished now, Rani Mashi, my limbs are withered, my hair does not retain its lustre. Can I really make a living from this profession anymore?’ Rani Mashi explained, ‘Beauty is not the prostituted woman’s main asset. Debauched men are not enraptured by looks. You will find the ugliest of women in prostitution earning more than all the pretty ones. That is why they say there’s no accounting for the ways of the heart. The god of lust clouds the eyes of the men when they wander about the prostituted women’s quarters after dark.’

Rani Mashi taught me several tricks, demonstrating various styles of dressing, how to stand, ways of speaking, the manner in which to walk, the entire way of conducting myself so as to attract men. Even through misery and despair I had to smile at strangers, and be so flirtatious that no one

could tell it was feigned. I learnt how to hold a glass to my lips, pretending to take sips, in case my lover was addicted to drinking. With lechers, each of them had to be given the kind of enjoyment they demanded. As I trained myself to deceive in this fashion, it seemed to me that a new Manada was being born within me.

I could sing well, and my voice was pleasing, as I have mentioned before. This is an art that serves prostituted women greatly. Rani Mashi engaged an ustad to teach me music; he said, ‘These patriotic and spiritual songs of yours will not work here, amongst prostitutes it’s lapeta or ghazal, or classical khayal or thumri. You can learn some kirtan too.’ I made considerable progress in a matter of three or four months with most of these, although the kirtan took me longer.

Along with the skills for deception, I also had to learn how to size men up. We had to be able to tell from someone’s face whether he was planning to steal from me or was afflicted with a foul illness, whether he was evil or a good man. I got into trouble too sometimes, for there were men who robbed prostituted women and even murdered them at times. The prostituted woman had to ply her trade with her life always at risk. For a mere two rupees or five a woman had to admit a stranger into her room—and the treacherous man could well stab her in the breast with a dagger and make off with her jewellery, leaving the wretched creature to die. It was not unknown for women in prostitution to be punished for their sins in this manner.

There was a gentleman who used to visit me, an eminent doctor of the city. It seemed he was not married at that time. I benefited greatly because of him; he gave me excellent medicines. He was extraordinarily good as a doctor, paying the fee for having someone like him treat me would have been beyond my means. He gave me ten or even twenty rupees whenever he spent two or three hours with me. Sometimes he took me for a drive in his car in the evening—we would stroll around the Grand Hotel, the bank of

the Ganga, or Eden Gardens, and return late at night, whereupon he would give me fifty rupees. His largesse brought me nearly two hundred rupees a month.

Rani Mashi used to warn me, ‘Earn as much as you can, while you can, ma. Keep your old age in mind. If you do not save now you will suffer afterwards, as you can see, no one in this profession has any friends. Money is all you will have.’ The generosity of the doctor had made me less diligent when it came to making money from other clients, but Rani Mashi knew only too well he wouldn’t be there forever. Her surmise was not wrong.

That year, 1915, there was a great cyclone in East Bengal in the month of Ashwin, in which many people were killed, and houses, gardens and crops were destroyed. A relief fund was started in Calcutta to alleviate their suffering, with the famous barristers Byomkesh Chakraborty and Chittaranjan Das (both dead now) leading this noble mission. Their efforts led to thousands of rupees being collected. Young men walked on the streets, singing and gathering money; they visited the prostituted women’s quarters too, and we contributed to the best of our abilities.

One day my doctor babu told me, ‘Maani, it will make Mr C.R. Das particularly happy if all of you can make a collection and contribute the amount to the East Bengal Cyclone Fund. He would like all levels of society to respond to this noble cause. Do you think you can do it?’

I said, ‘I’m new in this field, I do not know everyone personally. If I have your support I will try my best.’ He said, ‘I know some more women in Rambagan and Sonagachhi and Phulbagan, theatre actresses can be included too.’

Apparently the doctor was already acquainted with Mr C.R. Das. Because of his own and some of his other friends’ efforts, the contribution of the women in prostitution amounted to over a thousand rupees. This was my first involvement in a public cause, and it gave me an opportunity to feel Mr C.R. Das’s touch on me. Tears of joy rolled down his cheeks when

we bent over his feet and laid the bundle of currency notes. He gave us his blessings with his hand on our heads; I realised why he was called ‘Deshbandhu’.

Visiting Rajbala in her room once day, I found it filled with beautiful, expensive furniture. A new bed, a mirror on the wall, and a bookcase adorned her room now. A fresh mattress had been made for her bed, and she was even wearing new jewellery. Rajbala had not only paid back her loan to Rani Mashi, but she had also saved some money of her own. I did not know a prostituted woman living in a shanty could earn so much. When I asked her how she had done it, Rajbala said, ‘Brothels attract all manners of people. Sons of wealthy zamindars visit prostituted women openly with their friends, they do not fear social embarrassment, and indulge freely in music and drinking. You won’t find them setting foot in humble shanties—their principal pilgrimages are to Rambagan and Sonagachhi. But there is another kind of lascivious man, who fears the censure of society, who is revered because of his high post—such men go to brothels alone, furtively. Their desire is the only reason for their visit; they are not looking for music or singing or any other form of entertainment. They arrive and depart in secret, protecting their social honour and reputation. Poets, writers, social reformers, lawyers, schoolteachers, college professors, leaders and their deputies, senior government officers, Brahmos, Brahmins, classical scholars, priests, monastery heads, spirituality entrepreneurs—these are the classes such people come from. A famous High Court lawyer visits me regularly; he belongs to a family of high-borns.

‘His name is _____. Slightly on the older side. He gives me a great deal of money. One day I told him in jest, you will be given a prestigious position in the High Court. My words have come true, he has indeed got a senior post. He’s so happy that he has bought me all these things. This expensive ring you see, this is a gift from him too.’

The evening went by in our conversation. As I made to leave, a man walked in, and was met with a warm welcome from Rajbala. Outside, I murmured, ‘Who’s this, he looks like a Brahmin scholar.’ Rajbala said, ‘One of my babus, a very well-known professor, has the title of “Mahamahopadhyay”. He’s besotted with me these days, but he has a failing—he needs someone new every night. He’s well-known among women in prostitution, and he frequents these humble houses like ours. I’m squeezing as much out of him as I can, there’s no telling when he will disappear.’

Kalidasi had left Harkata Lane for Rambagan a short while ago. She had gained the affection of a rich merchant; one day I visited her in her new house to discover she was surrounded by a grand array of wealth in the two enormous rooms she occupied on the second floor, one as a sitting room and one as a bedroom. Electric lights, fans, an ornate bed, bookcases, a giant mirror, paintings, a marble-topped table, linoleum on the floor, milk-white bed linen with the softest of pillows, silver paan salvers, gleaming ashtrays. The beautiful earthen dolls of Krishnanagar adorned the shelves. She had three sets of gem-studded ornaments, two put away, and one on her. When she went out it was in a sari and blouse of Benaras silk; at home too she wore nothing less than expensive silk saris from Shantipur. Her merchant babu gave her three hundred rupees a month, which she used on food and clothing.

Kalidasi had been in possession of her Aladdin’s lamp for some two or three months. I was astonished at the sight, and a ray of hope appeared. A devil within me kept saying, ‘This can be your fortune too,’ and I began to pursue this mirage.

I have already mentioned that Kalidasi was pretty, and a comfortable life had enhanced her beauty. Although she was from a village, she was an accomplished singer; I had taught her some songs too. In this house, she had acquired a mother; it was this woman, according to Kalidasi, who had

got hold of the merchant for her and moved her out of Harkata Lane to Rambagan. Now Kalidasi advised me to move too, and I began looking for an opportunity.

With the loan from Rani Mashi almost paid back, I had no other debts, and had sufficient furniture of my own. This was when I made the acquaintance of a man, a young Brahmin, a bank officer in an important position. His name,_____ padhyay. After two or three visits, he appeared to have developed a special attraction for me, with my singing in particular enchanting him.

He proposed shifting me elsewhere, saying, ‘I would like to keep you in better style. This Harkata Lane is not a place for cultured people, it’s a den of lowlife.’ I reflected, ‘Imagine a prostituted woman being finicky about the company she keeps. Is there a caste system in this world too?’ I did not agree, since it would mean losing my doctor babu. Concealing the truth, I said, ‘I have some debts to settle, and I owe the landlady some money too, we’ll see about moving in three or four months.’

The bank officer used to spend the night in my room sometimes, accompanied by a friend or two. Some of them drank a little, but none of them was an out-and-out drunkard. Occasionally, I would cook delicacies like luchi or parota, along with meat and fish, for them. And so the intimacy deepened gradually. This babu of mine was addicted to paan; he was forever chewing expensive paan wrapped in gold and silver foil. A man of delicate tastes, he had been given a large, elegant car, which he rode in when visiting me. We had gone for a drive in this car many times.

For some time I attempted to balance my two lives, but it did not prove possible. My doctor babu realised I had been claimed by another lover. The frequency of his visits fell, and finally he stopped visiting altogether. Since my_____ padhyay-babu was still insistent on my moving elsewhere, I extracted five hundred rupees from him under the pretext of paying back my debt. I demanded another two hundred as moving expenses, which, too,

he paid. I took a place with two decent rooms on rent in a house near Kalidasi's in Rambagan.

My former babu, the doctor, is now an eminent physician. As I have mentioned, he had not yet married at that time. In my early days as a woman in prostitution, I preferred unmarried men, under the impression that not having a wife at home would make them feel more attached to the prostituted woman they visited. But my long experience has proved me wrong, I have seen that those who love their wives also love their mistresses. On the contrary, bachelors are fickle and cannot bind their hearts to anyone else's easily.

I had heard that my doctor babu had become infatuated with many other women after me; apparently he had even caused a scandal in a married woman's family. Newspaper reports hinted at much, god alone knows the truth of it all.

After moving to Rambagan, my days passed in happiness and comfort, but still my heart was periodically haunted by a regret, for there was no news of either Mukul-dada or of Kamala. As for my father, maternal uncle or Nanda-dada, I was fearful of being accosted by them, I would prefer not to meet them at all. But Kamala and Mukul-dada knew of the inception of this life of mine; so I yearned for them. Already in this brief period I had realised how dangerous the life of a woman in prostitution was. Others might loathe me or push me away disdainfully—but I was certain that Mukul-dada and Kamala would never forsake me.

In Rambagan, I turned my mind towards reading, asking my babu for money to buy a cupboard for my books. He was pleased at my thirst for knowledge, and purchased copies of the monthly magazines *Probashi* and *Bharatbarsha* for me. As for the daily newspaper, he would bring it directly from his office. Music, reading and my babu's love for me afforded my heart a kind of temporary stability.

An epochal change was coming over literature at the time, which I will discuss briefly because of its close relationship with the lives of prostituted women. The image that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his contemporaries drew of the adulteress reinforced nothing but hatred. In novels like *Krishnakanter Will* and *Chandrashekhar*, we see the straying wife's life culminating in nothing but severe punishment, followed by repentance. In fact, the portrayal of the unchaste woman all this time has been such that people are repelled by them—they are afraid and ashamed to come into contact with them. This is what we are shown in Amritalal Basu's play *Tarubala*. But after this, Rabindranath Tagore revealed a different aspect of the character of the adulteress, which makes us sympathetic. And what he kept unclear was revealed openly by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Naresh Chandra Sengupta, and other young writers, ensuring that people could still be attracted to such women. They said, 'Prostituted women may not be pure, but they are not devoid of human ideals. Considering that the fallen woman can be simple at heart, spiritual, godfearing, compassionate and generous, why does she have to an object of scorn? The fault lies with society, not with the woman.'

These novels and works of literature roused unprecedented excitement amongst young women and men. Reading *Srikanter Bhromonkahini* they went in search of an immoral woman like Rajlakshmi; the publication of *Shubho* made them look for an actress like Shubho Shongini. They grew desperate to locate Saraju of the play titled *Paro Pare*. The experience of all these years has convinced me that the young men of Bengal are gradually falling under the influence of an increasing number of defiled women.

The new litterateurs have identified this depiction of the prostituted woman's life as part of realistic art. Such art has become the pretext to spread destructive poison in society. Well-educated college students are entering the business of acting, the sons of noble zamindars are taking their wives and daughters to the theatre in full view of thousands of members of

the audience, parents are despatching their daughters to dance on stage, husbands are listening to their wives behaving flirtatiously with other men under the guise of acting, fathers are looking on as their unmarried daughters learn the ruses of love on the stage. The one who has been anointed poet of the world, from whom everyone expects high ideals, is personally rehearsing songs with actresses in their theatre. Even the Brahmo Samaj, which is supposed to teach us moral behaviour, is infatuated with this art. Rabindranath Tagore, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Lady Abala Bose, Mrs Kamini Roy, Mrs B.L. Chaudhuri, Sarala Debi—personages like them all support young women from respectable families dancing on stage. There have been copious protests against this in the newspapers, all of which I have read, and burnt with anguish as a result.

The reason I must state these things is that the outcome of the lack of restraint and caution seen in the lives of immoral women like ourselves has percolated into almost every layer of society. It is my intention and my appeal that those who are concerned with the betterment of society pay heed to this. Are guardians aware that, just like the young man lacking in foresight whose spell I fell under to become a wanton woman, Rani or Chuni’s lover-clients are also promoters of this manner of singing and dancing on stage? I may have sunk into it myself, but it causes me pain to see all of society sink into it the same way. Our Chuni’s babu, the artist, is an important patron of _____ Sammilani. I have heard Chuni make some allegations against this organisation, which I shall not repeat for I cannot verify them.

There was one more outcome of the realism of this new literature. Earlier, contributions made by women in prostitution for good causes were often not accepted; in fact, it seems landowners in the countryside did not even accept taxes from prostituted women. This attitude began to change gradually, with Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das setting an example with his generous heart. He did not stop at accepting the monetary contributions, he

also invited them to join the cause of serving the country. His intentions were noble, but the low beings that we were, we could not fulfil them. The mantle of national leadership fell on his shoulders after 1918, even as the new literature was clearly sympathetically disposed towards us, which provided us an opportunity to be part of the society of ladies and gentlemen. I shall describe the result at the appropriate place in this narrative.

Before I recount my public participation in the political and social revolutions aimed at improving the lives of the people, I shall recount one or two other incidents from my life before drawing this chapter to a close.

A woman rented a room in our house; she was seven months pregnant. It was not long before I learnt everything about her. A widow from an impoverished Kayastha family, she had been thrown into this predicament by her spiritual guide, _____ Vidyabhushan, who no longer kept her company. Unable to find sanctuary anywhere because of the stain on her reputation, she had been compelled to shift into prostituted women's quarters, for this was the home of all calumny and sin. I took the initiative to help this unfortunate woman.

On my advice, she wrote a letter to Vidyabhusan mahashoy. By a stroke of luck, he made an appearance a few days later, and I made his acquaintance on various pretexts, taking advice from my bank officer babu for the purpose. One day I went up to Vidyabhusan mahashoy deferentially and said, 'This poor girl is in trouble now, what is she to do if you forsake her at this hour?' But he ignored my question. Agitated, I said, 'We are women in prostitution, sir, reviled by all of you, while you are a pillar of society, do you wish to be reprimanded by one of us tonight? Do you feel no shame? Under the guise of being her spiritual guide you preyed on the chastity of a widowed disciple, you plunged her into poverty and scandal. Are you not supposed to be a learned pedant, are you not a teacher of the human mind? I condemn your punditry, I condemn your scholarship. It is true that we sinful prostituted women will go to hell, do you wish to know

why you and your kind will not? Because a pit of hell large enough to accommodate you and your kind has not yet been created.' Vidyabhusan mahashoy was silent in the face of this diatribe. Without pausing, I wagged my finger in front of his nose and said angrily, 'Leave if you wish to. But know this, I shall not give up till I have taken her with me to the courts and obtained an order for you to pay for her maintenance. I know you will perhaps deny everything. But all of us in this building will testify that you used to visit her in her room and that it was you who got her pregnant. We tell many lies in any case, nothing will stop our tongues from lying if it benefits an innocent woman and leads to the punishment of a dishonest, debauched man.'

Vidyabhusan mahashoy left without a word, but it was evident that he was frightened. Returning a few days later, he gave me one hundred rupees and said, 'Use this money for all expenses for her.' I accepted the amount and utilised it to procure everything that the woman needed. She gave birth in due course, after which Vidyabhusan mahashoy took both mother and child away. Subsequent enquiries revealed that he did not provide any more financial assistance to the widow. Many people were aware of his immoral ways; he had brought ruination upon the lives of several other female disciples of his. I had divulged everything at his workplace through an anonymous letter. Afterwards I came to know that he had left his lucrative positions, and that in his old age he had accepted the hand of a sixteen-year-old to satiate his desire for youth. The sight of putrefying sores in the section of society we have left behind us makes even prostituted women wrinkle their noses in abhorrence.

A woman in prostitution named Sushila used to live near our house; she was a nawab's mistress, a profusely wealthy man with enormous riches that do not need description. The nawab had spent several lakhs of rupees to construct an immense palace in his capital, but he did not reside in it, he had abandoned it to live in Calcutta with his mistress. Meanwhile his palace of

gold had become the den of wild animals. His subjects were in abject distress, with their debt mounting by the day in the absence of good governance and an administration. The nawab squeezed the blood out of the poor peasants to expend it on worshipping his goddess. There was nothing new about nawabs and badshahs becoming besotted with prostituted women, but there is a reason I am mentioning it here. Every time I visited Sushila in her room, it had more additions by way of expensive furniture, paintings, curtains, jewellery, mirrors, ivory-inlaid statues and so on from the nawab's capital city. Some of these would subsequently be sold, while the rest remained in her room. All of them were resplendent in the old palace in the capital earlier, symbols of the achievements of the nawab's ancestors. I used to regret the way they were being destroyed only to pander to the whims of a mere prostituted woman. How can a race so disdainful about its forefathers be anything but subservient?

A car had been purchased for Sushila's comfort; she was now surrounded by greater wealth and luxury that the nawab's principal wife was. The nawab had borrowed money and pawned his assets to provide Sushila with a monthly income of one thousand rupees. But his unpaid debts led him to the courts, where he had to stand trial for default.

Even though I'm a woman in prostitution I immerse myself in political news. Let those who are raising the cry for freedom today consider this—if the descendants of the badshahs and rajas of this land are going to ruthlessly sacrifice the precious memories of their own history of independence at the sullied altars of love for their mistresses, if they value a seductive look from a prostituted woman more than their personal legacy, where is the hope of breaking free from foreign rule? The giant tree of enlightenment that leads to independence does not sprout from a soiled bed of garbage.

Chapter the Eighth

Playing with Fire

IN 1920 THE NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT began across India under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. Students would not go to schools and colleges; lawyers and barristers would not attend their chambers and the courts; no one could go to the council offices; titles and awards bestowed by the government would be returned; no one would buy foreign goods—these five forms of boycott were the motto of the principle of non-cooperation. Meetings, gatherings, speeches and picketing—protesting against opposition to the movement—were organised across the land, in every village and town, to spread the word. Young men formed teams of volunteers and fanned out. The cry went up, we need workers.

Women joined men in this work, with Basanti Devi—Deshbandhu Chittaranjan's wife—taking up the leadership. Among the like-minded women who must be mentioned are Urmila Devi, Suniti Devi, Santosh Kumari Sengupta, Mohini Devi, Hemprabha Majumdar, Bagala Som and Uma Devi. Many women from the villages and the districts came too—I witnessed extraordinary enthusiasm and fervour, along with an unprecedented wave of activity. To unite all the women, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das established the Nari Karma Mandir. More about this later.

The police began arresting people everywhere, not sparing even the women. Some of us prostituted women formed a small group, with our babus advising and encouraging us from the background. We had already had the opportunity to mingle with the cultured sections of society when we had gone out on collection drives for the East Bengal Cyclone Fund. This had boosted our courage, wisdom and skills. We had met a number of important as well as minor leaders. When we returned to work for the

cause, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan's colleagues were exceedingly pleased and helped us in various ways.

Emotions over the Non-cooperation Movement rose to such a fever pitch that while working shoulder to shoulder we forgot that we were in a reviled and untouchable profession, while they were young men from respectable families held in high regard. On their part, the young men did not remember either that they were in the company of women in prostitution. We drove in the same cars and even conversed laughingly with innocent men who had never visited, or even dreamt of visiting, a brothel. Everyone praised our selflessness, and our chests swelled with pride.

One day we went up to Deshbandhu Chittaranjan after the day's work to touch his feet before going back home. He gave us his blessings affectionately. Another middle-aged man was sitting nearby; he realised we were a group of women in prostitution. Addressing Deshbandhu, he said, 'Now these people have joined the movement too—do you think this is right, Mr Das?' Chittaranjan answered acerbically, 'You and others like you belong to the brigade of high taste, your views will never match mine. You should join Keshto Mittir, who edits *Sanjibani*, he is a man after your hearts. The Shadharon Brahmo Samaj was established to be free of the narrow-minded Keshab Sen and adopt liberal ways; but this institution too is now proving to be illiberal. It will not do to be keep our doors open a crack, we must open them wide to accept everyone. What do you see in the West? We must do the same. Those whom we have kept at arms' length out of hatred are the ones stepping up today; this is a good omen, I have discovered a miraculous force at the bottom of the garbage heap.'

We left. I do not know how long their argument continued, but I see today that we were unable to fulfil Deshbandhu's hopes, that we shattered the great man's dreams. He had expected the flames of patriotism to cleanse our sins, but this could not be. Such unrestricted mingling between women

working in prostitution and young men working for the nation proved dangerous.

It is dangerous to play with fire, not everyone can do it. The leaders of the freedom movement had erred in including us in their mission. A noble objective requires a foundation of purity, which we did not possess. We involved ourselves in an important effort without being pure-hearted or self-restrained. Our primary characteristics are lying, deception, insincerity, sensuality—although we dedicated ourselves to the cause of our motherland, it was these corrupt tendencies that controlled us.

Some of the young men in the movement whose morals were so strong that they had not even smoked a cigarette until then took up drinking after coming under our influence. Men who were so unsullied in character that they would not even lift their eyes from the floor when talking to ladies changed so much in our company that, leave alone prostituted women, they did not think twice before indulging in bawdy humour with married women. It is in our nature to seize on upright, principled men and to consider defiling their self-control and innocence an act of valour.

I know for a fact that each of us who contributed to the work for the non-cooperation movement seduced several of the young men who were working for the cause of freedom. I myself was no exception. Some of us did not even baulk at casting flirtatious glances towards our father figure Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das’s associates. Our subject of discussion when we went back home was how many new babus each of us had added, whose room this patriot or that one was visiting, how much paan and how many cigarettes we bought using their money, how often we rode in cars, how much of the taxi fare we had kept for ourselves, and so on.

It was not just the young men whom we corrupted. Wives and daughters had also left the confines of their households to join the movement, although, of course, all of them were from educated and liberal families. Orthodox Hindus did not usually allow the women to leave their chambers.

We would have conversations sometimes with them; I know that some of the women who came out to spread the word about the movement did not go back to their husbands anymore. Some of them embarked on businesses of their own, while some entered into illicit affairs with freedom fighters, even living with them in the guise of married couples. Everyone knows the real nature of these freedom fighters, and yet it is these debauchees posing as holy men whom they send to the corporations and councils with their votes. That is how deep the blindness of society runs.

Let me recount a particular incident. The wife of an impoverished Brahmin had joined us, a ravishing beauty—I had seen her myself, and even spoken to her several times. She might even identify me if she happens to read this book. We had struck up a friendship despite our scant acquaintance. I am begging her pardon here for being compelled to relate this incident that concerns her; I am aware who is at least partially responsible for her moral degeneration.

I remember having somewhat intimate conversations with the Brahmin's wife. She had, by then, become involved in an extra-marital relationship with a Kayastha freedom fighter. This young man was highly educated and celibate—till then. I was a little surprised at first, for I had not expected my lovely young friend to end up falling so deeply in love with a man from a village. She had been to East Bengal with some other women to take the message of the Non-cooperation Movement to the people there. After her return, she began to study the Gita with the celibate young man in a secluded room in a corner of the Nari Karma Mandir, the working centre for women.

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan had made living arrangements for the women who had come to Calcutta from the districts. It was this that led to the formation of the centre. At first it was located in Bhowanipore, under Deshbandhu's direct supervision. Afterwards, when his principal assistant Basanta Kumar Majumdar's wife Hemprabha Majumdar demonstrated her

abilities at running it, she was given the entire responsibility, and it was shifted to Sitaram Ghosh Street.

The Brahmin woman in question did not go back to her husband after leaving her home; she has been staying in Calcutta ever since. Her illicit relationship with her new lover led to her pregnancy, whereupon the patriotic young man fled with her. Those who had tried to obstruct this adulterous affair informed Deshbandhu Chittaranjan of this development, for the young man in question had been a favourite of his. But he could offer no remedy.

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan was aware of many instances of such immoral relationships, but when he saw he was unable to prevent any of them by any means, when he lost several fine workers of hitherto unblemished character because of their lack of morals, his heart broke from the ensuing unhappiness, and so did his health. Avaricious workers began to exploit him for money, and the blow of desertion by one of his favourites felled him once and for all. The women in prostitution from our quarters joined the enormous procession that bore his body to the crematorium, but I was not among them.

To one of my friends I said, ‘Look, it was we who killed Deshbandhu Chittaranjan, we are also responsible for his untimely death. In the guise of serving the nation we poisoned every layer of his team of workers, we caused him great hurt while he was alive. Now that he has been cleansed by death and is making his way to heaven, let not the tainted glance of a woman like me fall on him.’ This was my thought behind not seeking a final glimpse.

The Brahmin woman lives with her lover now as a married couple; I believe the child has been born. They move about more or less freely in society. And thus the highly educated and former virtuously virginal man has committed adultery and established his status, so much so that he now

enjoys a high position at court. How blind you are, society, when it comes to men.

The police would arrest women protesters during picketing. On one occasion, Basanti Devi and Bagala Som were taken to the police station and warned. We did not fear the police, for we were on special terms with everyone from the beat constable to high-ranking officers. They took some of us to the police station too, where the officer-in-charge chuckled on seeing us. He turned out to be someone I knew already; I had met him at the famous actress Niradasundari's home. Most people in Calcutta knew this police officer of Brahmin stock quite well; needless to add, he set us free at once.

Some time after this, North Bengal was struck by floods, and funds began to be collected for the affected people. A central committee was set up for the purpose, with Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy being appointed its leader. Students and young men went out on the roads in processions, singing and collecting money. The rich made generous donations spontaneously; the owners of theatre and bioscope companies had benefit nights; small clubs and organisations collected money by selling tickets for entertainment events, even the government allocated a little money.

We had already been emboldened during the Non-cooperation Movement when it came to going out in full view of people—so we did not remain indifferent to the cause. Our team was constituted beforehand, but we had to expand it this time. We proposed going out on the streets to sing instead of only conducting a collection drive amongst ourselves. Accordingly, the prostituted women of Harkata Lane, Rambagan, Sonagachhi, Phulbagan, Champatala, Ahiritola, Jorasanko, Simla, Keranibagan and all the other localities formed their own squads and went out on the streets to collect contributions.

It was a glorious sight. Calcuttans were flabbergasted to see groups of 50 or 60 women in prostitution—all dressed in saffron saris with red borders—

their hair left loose on their backs, vermilion drops on their brows, alluring gait, and sweet-throated songs on their lips, accompanied by a few men playing the clarinet and the harmonium. Two women walked in front, holding a red banner with the name of the neighbourhood to which this particular group belonged. Behind them two more women held a large piece of cloth by the corners, into which contributors tossed coins and currency notes. Two other women collected old clothes.

It isn't as though all prostituted women are beautiful, but it is not true that all of them are rather ugly. In any event, all of us look pretty when we dress up and go out, for looks, after all, are the basis of our business. Women in prostitution are not allowed to line up on the streets of Calcutta; the police arrest them if they do. They can only go as far as their front door to entice customers. Even in the quarters they occupy, therefore, you seldom see more than three or four women together. In such a situation, can you imagine the reaction of ordinary people to a large group marching along the road, singing?

As I have mentioned before, the constant exposure to a wayward life of lust and greed strengthens the immoral side of women working in this line. Neither patriotism during the Non-cooperation Movement, nor compassion while collecting funds for the victims of flood, affected our hearts greatly. It was just that we had taken advantage of an opportunity to establish our presence among our own people. Even if not every one of us was propelled by this desire, many were.

Hundreds of people accompanied us every time we went out on the streets.

Not everyone contributed because they were moved by the plight of the victims of the floods; they parted with their money because they were attracted by our beauty, our music, our beguiling glances. The processions taken out by students and young men did not attract such crowds.

The prostituted women went out two times a day, morning and evening, to gather money. We collected several thousands of rupees, but only a fraction of this reached the funds of the central committee, the rest of it was squandered in various ways. Still, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy affectionately accepted whatever we brought. Individuals with high morals had objections to taking the money we had collected, but Prafulla Chandra convinced them.

Gradually our opportunities for mingling with young men and married women from respectable families began to grow. Not that this had not been the case earlier, for we had unrestricted access to various temples and pilgrimage spots even then, as we do now. This too has led to some decay in social standards. But in these places people are busy with their religious rituals, and do not have the leisure or the temptation to introduce themselves to women in prostitution. But this time the way we took to the streets during the Non-cooperation Movement and the flood relief work made it essential for men and women from respectable sections of society to converse with us. At temples or fairs women like us were scattered about, without standing out prominently, but when we went out in a group to collect money or join the picketers, the enchanted look in people’s eyes made it clear that they found us irresistible.

The other main themes of Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-cooperation Movement were the abolition of untouchability, the spinning wheel, and khadi. Let me briefly outline the effect this had on women in prostitution. By abolition of untouchability, Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps referring to the fact that if those belonging to the lower castes, such as Hari, Muchi, Dom, Chandal, Dule-Bagdi, Santal, Dosad etc observed personal cleanliness, upper-caste people could accept food and water from them; they could also enter the temples of the gods with cleansed bodies, dressed in sanctified garments. But some of Mahatma Gandhi’s disciples added prostituted women to the ranks of the untouchables, and attempted to make

them acceptable in respectable society. Possibly everyone knows that men who frequent the homes of women in prostitution furtively accept every kind of food and drink they are offered—in fact, to use the word ‘accept’ is to leave the story incomplete; they feel grateful at the opportunity. It was the intention of these devotees of Gandhi to bring the clandestine act into the open. We had never been forbidden from entering temples—dazzled by our clothes, the priest gave instructions for the doors to be opened even without our asking for it, all out of greed for a fat payment.

This unprecedented show of sympathy with prostituted women led to the formation of women’s associations for them at many locations. Among these, it was the one in Barishal that attracted the greatest attention. It was at this time that a prostituted woman from Barishal came to my friend Kalidasi’s house. I cannot recall her name now; possibly she was called Basant Kumari. In any event, a young student, the son of a rich man, arrived in Calcutta with her. He had broken into his father’s iron safe to steal eight hundred rupees for the prostituted woman he was in love with. From Basant Kumari I heard that a famous patriotic philosopher was using the services of young men to spread the message of non-cooperation within brothels. The converted women were now spinning thread and wearing khadi clothes. I was inspired enough to buy a spinning wheel and dress the same way.

My efforts led about a dozen women in prostitution from Rambagan to start spinning thread too, and some of them donned khadi. But it all ended in a month or two, with the spinning wheels coming to a halt and the khadi garments being discarded. This was natural, for neither could survive the absence of self-restraint and purity.

One day a newspaper said: ‘How shameful it is that the young men of Ashwini Kumar’s Barishal feel no hesitation in coming into contact with prostituted women.’ I asked Basant Kumari, ‘Who is this Ashwini Kumar of Barishal?’ She said, ‘I went to Barishal only three months ago from

Brahmanbaria in Tripura district. I don't know who Ashwini Kumar is, *he* might know,' pointing to her babu. The young man in question was lying on the bed, chewing on paan and singing in a distorted voice.

'Haven't seen her yet
Only heard her flute
Gave her my heart or what I have…'

Turning to me, he said, 'You really haven't heard of Ashwini-babu? The renowned Ashwini Kumar Dutta. Considering you read so much, haven't you read his *Bhaktijog*? Try reading it. There's no better ideal of pure character to be found. Ashwini-babu has made Barishal what it is.'

I said, 'Oh, that Ashwini Kumar Dutta. Yes, I know of him. Aren't you from the same Barishal?' The young man continued singing brazenly.

'She only came to me in my dream
Smiled at me from the corner of her eyes'

I left in annoyance. It occurred to me how hypocritical humans can be—you can extol a noble idea while at the same time trampling over it with your own actions. In any event, Vasant's lover did bring me a copy of *Bhaktijog* one day, saying, 'Kindly accept this as a gift.' I have been reading the book from time to time ever since.

This association of women in prostitution grew so influential that a group of men with high morals decided to stand up against it. Krishna Kumar Mitra, the editor of *Sanjibani*, had been against it from the beginning, and took a stern position in his newspaper. I had seen this great man, as steadfast as a mountain, only on a few occasions, he had appeared divine to my eyes. I had heard two other women in prostitution refer to him—their names are Suruchi and Umabala. I shall recount their stories where appropriate.

I cannot but state one or two things more about Krishna Kumar Mitra here. Compared to his moral and blameless character, we are nothing but lowly worms from hell, but still I shall talk about him, as it will reveal

something of my personality too. Krishna-babu never forgave corruption on false pretexts, and spared nobody. He admonished Rabindranath for teaching actresses how to sing, he took Acharya Prafulla Chandra to task for accepting donations from prostituted women, he reprimanded Dr Bimal Chandra Ghosh for organising a dramatic performance featuring women in prostitution in order to raise funds for Sarayu Sadan, he castigated Mrs Jyotirmayi Ganguli for assuming leadership of the women volunteers at a gathering of prostituted women at Minerva Theatre. All of them were pillars of Brahmo society, and all my customers were frightened of him.

During Mahatma Gandhi's tour of Bengal, he was invited to a gathering by the association of women in prostitution in Barishal. But he did not attend it, saying that if such women were to form associations, so would criminals. The patriotic philosopher I referred to earlier is believed to have abandoned his work in Barishal after being at the receiving end of the Mahatma's diatribe.

Meanwhile, a crisis was looming large over my own life too. I had been unable to control my desires when joining the young men working for the nation during the political movement. I had sinned both physically and mentally; where there is a lack of education and discipline, where pride is paramount, this is inevitable. My bank officer babu, _____padhyay, had noticed my missteps and had begun to suspect me. Not that he was not guilty of his own transgression. I observed that his visits to the theatre had become more frequent, and one day my glance settled on him when he was conversing pleasantly with a particular actress in the greenroom. We had been to watch the play together, but he had left me behind in the box on some pretext; unknown to him, I had followed him.

Our hearts were like rain-laden monsoon clouds; I was expecting a gigantic clap of thunder very soon.

Chapter the Ninth

Vortex of Filth

ANOTHER OF MAHATMA GANDHI's missions was to stop people from drinking; accordingly, young men began picketing liquor shops in the city. One day our servant was stopped when trying to procure alcohol for one of our babus. The young men surrounded him and asked, 'Who's this for?' When the servant gave them our address, they asked for the name. 'Feroza Bibi,' he told them, using the nickname I had been given in Rambagan because of my partiality for clothes of that colour. The servant extricated himself with great effort.

I was resting briefly after lunch the next day when the servant informed me that a gentleman was waiting to meet me. Asking him to escort the visitor in, I rose to my feet from the bed, and was adjusting my clothes and hair in front of the mirror when I suddenly caught sight of a reflection. Whirling around, I discovered it was a friend of Nanda-dada's.

He was dressed in a khadi dhoti and a khadi shawl, had Madrasi sandals on his feet, and was carrying a thick walking stick. His hair was closely cropped. Without betraying the slightest surprise, I said in a bad-tempered voice, 'Who are you? What do you want at this time of the day?' But my heart was quaking.

Looking me up and down, Nanda-dada's friend said, 'What are you doing here, Maani?' I said, 'My name is Feroza Bibi…' Entering my room, he sat down on the bed and laid his walking stick on it. I was standing near him; he took my right hand and said, 'Sit down here.' I sat down mechanically and began plucking at the bed cover.

His name was Upendra. 'So this is the path you chose?' he said. 'Is this where all your education has brought you?' I threw myself at his feet and began to weep. 'I got Feroza Bibi's address from your servant last night

when picketing at the liquor shop. Mahatma Gandhi's indoctrination has made us pledge to eradicate drinking. This is why we visit prostituted women too. I was given the responsibility of persuading Feroza Bibi, and now that I am here, I discover she is someone I know. Manada, remember then that alcohol is forbidden in your house from now on.'

Upen-babu gave me all the news from my home. My heartbroken father had sold his house in Calcutta and was living in a village. My uncle, Nanda-dada's father, had died. Nanda-dada had become involved with Gandhi's movements. Mukul-dada had passed his BL examination and was practising law at _____ court. Because his heart was in his books, he earned very little. Kamala had passed her matriculation examination and was studying to be a doctor in some town outside Bengal; her mother lived with her. Nanda-dada was not married yet.

I requested Upen-babu to visit me from time to time. He said, 'I have accomplished what I came to you for. You will not allow alcohol in your house. That is all, I have nothing else to do here.' He got to his feet. I pleaded with him to have a meal, but he refused everything, even paan. We had met some young freedom fighters with the same strength of character, who had succeeded in staying away from sinning even though they had come into close contact with sinners. Alcohol was no longer allowed in my house. My babu's friends were unhappy, my babu was angry. Upen-babu gave brief answers to the letters I would write him, which my babu viewed with suspicion. This made the bitterness between us grow by the day.

In my childhood I had seen Upen-babu many times in our house; he was Nanda-dada's neighbour and distant relative too. I had sent word to Nanda-dada many times to visit me, but when he came to know of my status, he refused.

My _____ padhyay babu left me within the next three months, and began frequenting the house of the actress I had seen him exchanging banter with. Now the bank's funds were lavished on the actress—he

squandered the money so recklessly that it went bankrupt a few years later, ruining not just the officer but also many of his countrymen. Many business organisations collapsed, thousands of people found themselves turned into beggars with their life's savings gone. If you investigate the root cause you will find out the truth. A well-established monthly magazine also had to go out of business because of its manager's addiction to women in prostitution.

I decided not to be tied to a single person anymore. Since I had the reputation of being a good singer, I moved to Sonagachhi. A young zamindar from Rajsahi who drank excessively began to visit me there. I used to go to the theatre with him quite often. We were sitting in the box one day; he was drunk and behaving erratically. I did not know that his mother-in-law was seated in a nearby box—apparently she was the wife of a renowned zamindar from East Bengal. Embarrassed by her son-in-law's antics, she took him away at once to her own house. The zamindar in question now patronises a woman in prostitution named Satyabala, someone I know. His standing in society remains high.

I used to perform at mujras too, held in the gardens of bungalows or at soirees. It was a way to earn money, of course, but dangerous too. It is beyond my capabilities to explain how irksome it is to pander to the whims of the wealthy. Sleepless nights, feigning love, coping with drunkenness—the heart and the mind both grew exhausted with these. Often I would tell myself, enough, it is time to sever all of this. I would be overwhelmed by repentance. But I was never able to overcome temptation, which drew me into a vortex every time.

In 1924, the satyagraha in Tarakeswar took place during the monsoon season. There were several accusations of high-handedness against Mahant Satish Giri, which had led the government to appoint a receiver to look after the deity's assets. But under the leadership of Swami Sachchinananda and Swami Vishwananda, members of the Mahavir Dal prevented the receiver from entering the temple. Meanwhile, the Congress, led by Deshbandhu

Chittaranjan Das, demanded to be let in, arguing that the mahant could not personally own any of the temple assets, and that people at large had the right to view and worship the idol. Everyone from the Mahavir Dal to the mahant, from the government to the Congress, were embroiled in the controversy, with fights, robberies and other horrible acts raging on for some time.

About a dozen of us left for Tarakeswar, where we found our counterparts from Hooghly, Srirampur, Sheoraphuli and other places had also gathered. We formed a team of women volunteers, and even collected some money for the satyagraha.

The Congresswallahs did not allow us to hold our demonstration outside the mahant's palace. Our primary responsibility was the protection of the temple. We formed a ring around Swami Sachchidananda when the police came to arrest him; thwarted, they left. We took turns to keep watch at the temple gate.

Dr Pratap Chandra Roy and Santosh Kumari Gupta were the main organisers of the Tarakeswar satyagraha. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan paid a visit, too, to encourage us. Several thousands of rupees were collected for the satyagraha fund, and plenty of money was spent on our comfort and pleasures. The problem at Tarakeswar was eventually resolved, but I have not been able to forget the vulgar scenes I witnessed there during the satyagraha. Unrestricted, sinful liaisons between women in prostitution who were present there as volunteers and the hypocritical debauchees masquerading in the same role; those lionised as working for the nation having dilemmas about whom to spend the night with; propositions made to me by satyagraha participants—all of these made me conclude that, far from establishing spirituality, the light of piety had truly gone out in Tarakeswar.

There I also met a woman named Sukruti who had come for a pilgrimage. She had a sister named Savitri; they were from a renowned

family from Jorasanko with a reputed lineage. People said there were no conflicts between the goddesses of learning and wealth in this family. Sukruti and Savitri had both entered prostitution and used to live in Sovabajar. A government lawyer frequented Sukruti's house. Savitri had died a few years ago; before her death, a well-known man working for the nation was her customer. How the families once considered the glory of Bengal had degenerated! From Sukruti I heard numerous stories about famous people that I dare not reproduce for fear of facing the law. Her own family had shown the way for free mingling among men and women.

From Upen-dada I had heard that Nanda-dada's own restraint was intact, no woman had succeeded in tempting him. The virtues of the Non-cooperation Movement had strengthened his moral fibre further. A spartan existence and devotion to good causes were the primary support for his life of celibacy. Not reading novels and stories and poetry as I had had worked to his advantage; poverty had been a friend to him. Indeed there were some men working for the nation with such purity of character, but they were few and far between.

About me, it seems he used to say, 'If Manada were to leave all the wealth of her sinful life behind and come to me only in the clothes she's wearing, I shall welcome her with open arms and love her like a sister. But I cannot have a relationship with her if she remains in a brothel as a prostituted woman.'

I have never smoked or drank alcohol—neither of these two habits aids women in prostitution when it comes to saving. My babus had tried their best to get me addicted to both, but it was futile. I helped Upen-babu as much as I could during his lengthy picketing outside the homes of women in prostitution to stop drinking.

Office employees and lawyers from small towns poured into Calcutta during the Durga Puja and Christmas holidays, and many of them visited us in that time. The zamindars and businessmen could, and did, come

whenever they wanted. A large number of them sent monthly allowances to their mistresses in Calcutta. A Rai Bahadur from Noakhali, a zamindar from Burdwan, a flourishing trader in medicine from Dhaka, a lawyer from Rangpur—I got some money from each of them. I have a friend named Prabha, the daughter of a jewellery trader from Chitpur. A lawyer from Mymensing was one of her babus; apparently he was acquainted with the businessman from Dhaka, which was how the latter had come to visit me. The unmarried daughter of a Calcutta barrister also lived in a room in the same house as Prabha. It was in the company of these new people that I began to spend my days in Sonagachhi. I consorted in particular with the women from renowned families; I have seen very few women in prostitution as intrepid as the barrister's daughter.

It was at this time that I witnessed a tragic incident, which I shall relate here. This will explain how direly sinful society has become. Surely it is the duty of our leaders to put an end to this.

There was a zamindar who lived near Badurbagan in central Calcutta. His ancestor, it seems, was an illustrious personage. This zamindar was the devil incarnate, who always had his prying eyes on his neighbours' wives. He also had a handful of friends and followers to help him with his evil designs. They would entice these married women with various ploys for their master to satisfy his lust. These sinful dalliances took place either in this man's mansion in Calcutta, or in a nearby bungalow.

Some of the housewives gave in to the temptation by choice, and others, reluctantly. Many of them neither sang nor drank, so those purposes were fulfilled by bringing women from Sonagachhi and Rambagan to entertain the men. I had been there too, once or twice. I would take one hundred rupees a night, my task was singing. I never drank. Two or three other prostituted women went along too, joining the men in the pleasures of alcohol.

One night I was summoned to the bungalow; collecting my payment in advance, I arrived at 8 pm to find a pretty housewife present there. She was eighteen or nineteen, her complexion like pure gold, her face tender and full of grace. I felt a surge of pain—I had seen many chaste women sacrificed to this thuggish zamindar's lasciviousness. We were sinners in equal measure. I could not pour my heart into my singing that night, and looked for an opportunity to talk to the young woman.

When the entertainment began, the zamindar and his friends began to drink, and I sang a song or two. The other prostituted women also performed. Using the heat as an excuse to take a walk outside, I whispered to the young woman, 'Let's go for a stroll in the garden.' We sat down on the steps leading to a pond and had a long conversation. The summary: Her name was Aparajita Devi, she was the daughter of a Brahmin, who lived somewhere in Burdwan district. She had got married to a Mukhopadhyay, who lived under the patronage of his aunt. The aunt in question had several sisters who lived in their own houses. Her husband's parents were dead; and he did not have any other relatives. A harmless, quiet man, he tried to keep his aunt happy by any means possible, in the hope of inheriting her house and wealth after her death.

Aparajita's husband's aunt was alleged to have acquired her assets through immoral means. Now, being frail in her old age, she apparently earned her money by putting up her nephews' wives' chastity for sale. Aparajita's husband had been married twice before; both the brides had burnt to death. According to the aunt, they had set themselves on fire. Aparajita, who was therefore her husband's third wife, had a son.

Her husband's aunt wanted to appoint her to earn money in the same way as the others, but Aparajita was not willing, which had led to constant persecution by the aunt. An evil doctor was the aunt's adviser and accomplice. Aparajita had succeeded in protecting her chastity till now.

‘What will you do now?’ I asked her. ‘Do you also want to kill yourself?’ She said, ‘Why should I? My father is alive, I have a brother, I have my son. I shall not kill myself.’ I was astonished by the resolve and self-control demonstrated by this young woman, who was still so young. Virtually a girl still, she had not received an education, she was illiterate, she had read no books—where had she acquired such spirit and strength of mind?

I said, ‘Do you know what will happen if you do not agree to their proposition?’ Aparajita said, ‘I do. They will kill me. My husband’s aunt killed his first two wives, and then told everyone they poured kerosene on their clothes and set themselves on fire. But no one is foolish enough to believe that two wives of the same man can die in succession the same way. Today I’ve been arguing with her all day, I threatened to reveal everything. If you try to do that, she said, I’ll choke you to death with my foot. So I have vowed not to let them touch a hair on my head while I am alive.’

I hung my head in shame at what she said, reflecting that she was a goddess from heaven while I was a worm from hell. Clearly, Hindu society did not give birth only to tarnished women like me, but also to chaste women like Aparajita. Fearing that the air around me, polluted by my presence, would also besmirch her purity, I did not converse with her much longer. Soon I saw an old woman and a man—identified by Aparajita as the aunt and the doctor—approaching us. I bent over to touch Aparajita’s feet in respect, after which she went towards them and I concealed myself behind a bush.

I took no further part in the entertainment, leaving early on the pretext of not feeling well. Nightmares didn’t let me sleep that night. Two days later I learnt that Aparajita had died; her husband’s aunt had told the police that she had burnt to death because of carelessness while cooking. The doctor’s examination, police investigation and coroner’s report did not reveal the truth. I spent a week in acute anxiety and unhappiness. And I recollect Aparajita’s beautiful face even today.

Do the pillars of our society keep themselves informed of how many such incidents take place in our homes? Society is sinking into a pit because of the curses of our chaste child brides, while rogues and debauched men are strutting about after purchasing their high status with their riches.

Kalidasi came to my house one day; her appearance betrayed her plight. She told me that her trader babu had gone bankrupt after lavishing all his money by betting on horses and on drinking; his business had collapsed. Kalidasi was now almost captive to a Marwari man, but she had no money. So she wanted to pawn her jewellery with me for five hundred rupees.

Those who frequent brothels usually develop two principal addictions—betting on horses and drinking. It was said that many people won thousands of rupees on horses but never kept their wealth; they lost their money the same way they had won it. The brothels overflowed on the evenings of the races—winners came to celebrate, and losers, to forget their sorrow.

I had no money with me, but I knew that a new addition to our building, named Ushabala, had some. The jewellery that Kalidasi had brought was worth some one thousand rupees. So Ushabala accepted my proposal and Kalidasi got five hundred rupees for pawning her ornaments.

Later I was told that she had also squandered this money on horses and alcohol. Keeping the company of her trader babu had introduced her to both these vices—this was her route to ruination. I was also told that she had already had an affair with the new Marwari young man. All of this robbed me of any sympathy I might have felt for her; she was never able to pay Ushabala back and redeem her jewellery.

Kalidasi is still alive, atoning for her sins as I do. Some time ago, when I saw her exchanging crude banter with a Muslim bidiwala in a dirty slum in the city, I realised why women in prostitution die young. At twenty-six, her body was emaciated, dry and shrivelled like a sixty-year-old’s. Drinking had brought on all manner of diseases; all she owned was the sari she was wearing, and she did not even get two meals a day—but still she was

allowing herself to be abused. I did not pause to talk to her; I was reminded of what the mahant had said in Vrindavan, no one can thwart destiny, it is the outcome of your deeds.

Let me talk about Ushabala here. She was married to a Brahmin lawyer from Faridpur; a group of rich Muslims had abducted her from her father's house and put her up in Beliaghata, near Calcutta. Mahesh Chandra Atarthi from the Women's Protection Association heard about this and extricated her with the help of his fellow-members and the police. This led to a court case, but Ushabala's husband refused to acknowledge her as his wife. She stayed for some time at the residence of Krishna Kumar Mitra, who was also the director of the Women's Protection Association. 'Krishna Kumar Mitra treated me as he would his own daughter,' Ushabala had told me. 'He made arrangements for my education, and had me admitted to an institute to learn some crafts. But I simply could not concentrate, it became impossible to control my proclivities. Since I was over eighteen, they could not have kept me there by force. The twists and turns of circumstances have brought me here; I even had to sell paan on the streets for some time.'

Whenever the chastisement of women became particularly vicious, there was a gentleman whom I'd see visiting the homes of prostituted women. He was known to us as Tarak-babu; four or five of the women enjoyed his trust, he trusted me too. We had especially noticed that he did not visit us with any ulterior motive. Whether he was a member of the Women's Protection Association or a police detective, I do not know. But he had told me that many rogues abducted young girls as well as married women and hid them away in brothels; sometimes women were forced by the fear of scandal to voluntarily live in such a place so that she could be intimate with her lover. It was to investigate such cases that he frequented brothels secretly. We used to help him as much as we could.

One day Tarak-babu told me, 'Can you make some enquiries about the woman who has rented the entire building across the street? I need some

information.’ I began to pay visits over there, and soon grew close to the woman in question, learning her real story.

When Tarak-babu returned a few days later I told him, she’s from a Brahmin family, her name is Suruchibala, her father is a retired engineer now living in Kashi. Suruchi got married to a young Brahmin from Hooghly district. She says her husband had married another woman too, and she had not found a place for herself in his house; so she used to live with her father. Given to reading novels and stories from an early age, she grew increasingly wayward in nature. Refusing to be controlled by her parents, she ran away to Calcutta with one of the many dangerous men in Kashi. Here she was handed over from one man to another, losing her honour entirely. The police arrested her after coming upon her in an objectionable state; the judge found himself in difficulties when the police produced her in court. Mahesh Chandra Atarthi, a tireless worker and the secretary of the Women’s Protection Association, happened to have been in court that day on some other business. The judge, who knew Mahesh-babu, told him, ‘Take this woman with you, make arrangements for her on behalf of the Women’s Protection Association.’

Suruchi was given shelter with Krishna Kumar Mitra, who tried with fatherly love to guide her back to a moral life. But she continued to deceive the simple-hearted, generous, compassionate gentleman and, falling prey once more to the enticement of evil men, chose a path of sin. At the moment a wealthy young Parsi was her patron; she lived like an Englishwoman—her bobbed hair didn’t go below her shoulder, she wore knee-length skirts with matching silk stockings, and spoke fluent Hindi; she had learnt some English too.

Listening closely, Tarak-babu said, ‘I suppose you do not know why she ran away from Krishna-babu’s house.’ I said, ‘No, Suruchi didn’t tell me.’ Tarak-babu said, ‘She had made off with Krishna-babu’s son-in-law Sachin’s gold watch, because of which Mahesh-babu took her back to the

court. There she sought permission to join this line of work, whereupon the judge acquiesced and set her free.’

In the midst of this conversation Suruchi entered the room smiling, carrying flowers, fruits, cake and biscuit. I asked her to sit down, but she remained standing and said, ‘Maan-di, I went to Hogg Market today in the car, I got these things there. You’re invited to tea tomorrow morning, please come. By the way, I met that old fool Mahesh Atarthi today, I said, how are you, you old fool?’

I don’t know what arrangements Tarak-babu made for Suruchi eventually, but when I think of her and Usha, I realise they are just as wretched as me. Like me they were overwhelmed by temptation at the onset of womanhood and allowed all restraint to be swept away—and now they are floundering in a bottomless ocean. They too had the opportunity to return to a life of morality; but, just like me, destiny probably holds more suffering for them too—none of us has been able to evade the outcome of our acts.

Chapter the Tenth

Innovative Method

MY INCOME DWINDLED GREATLY AFTER shifting to Sonagachhi. My health too grew weaker because of the advent of various illnesses; I had to spend a considerable amount on the cook and servant and medicine. I used to observe some religious rituals too—in particular I never missed Saraswati Puja—but my earnings could no longer keep up.

A lawyer and a barrister used to visit me; they were associates not just in the practice of law but also in their patronage. I shall mention a particular practice observed among women in prostitution—it is considered reprehensible to become illicitly involved with one's babu's friends. It is true that many prostituted women, swayed by temptation, flout this rule in secret, but it earns them a bad reputation amongst their counterparts. The end of friendship between gentlemen often takes place because of affairs involving a prostituted woman's babu and his friends; it even leads to fisticuffs and, sometimes, death.

Having fallen upon bad days financially, I accepted both these friends as my lovers. I did not observe any competitiveness between them.

Many of the women in prostitution criticised me for this, but as for me, the ocean was my playground, what fear did I have of a dewdrop? Since I had chosen to take up this line of work I was already wearing a crown of infamy on my head. I recalled the madwoman's song from *Bolidan*, the play:

> Secret lovers suit no one
> But the woman who wears
> A jewel of disgrace.

Now that I am sinking into hell, I reflected, let me go as deep as possible to examine the various currents flowing in its layers.

Gradually a few important people began visiting me, by virtue of their acquaintance with my lawyer and barrister babus. They paid me handsomely. Now I had a brainwave. I knew that these two men knew a great many eminent people of Calcutta. So I appointed them to get those people to become my customers—in return, my two babus would keep half the money they paid.

Now, finally, I turned into a full-fledged woman in prostitution. When I lived in Rambagan, there were a few lower-class people who would persuade passers-by to come into my room in exchange for a payment, but under Police Commissioner Tegart's rule all of this had stopped. I was aware that even gentlemen acted as pimps for prostituted women in Calcutta; in fact, some of these women had advised me to have a gentleman pimp, but because I still had some vestige of conscience and morals, I could not do it. But now, having travelled to the frontier of the world of sins, I no longer hesitated in trampling over the remnants of the goodness in my heart.

Both my lawyer and barrister pimps were clever as well as cunning; they proved most adept at their work, and got the creme de la creme of the city to visit me—from well-educated sons of zamindars to political leaders, from highly regarded doctors to social reformers and wealthy businessmen. Most of them were middle-aged or older. They even brought in men from outside Bengal.

I managed to save some money in four or five months; my pimps earned a good deal too. Examining my heart, I discovered how small and impoverished it had become. The daily lies, the constant deception, the continuous pursuit of money—all of these had turned my soul into a forest infested by wild beasts. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw that my beauty and grace were gone, an image from hell was reflected in it. Although I was growing older, my lawyer and barrister friends had not

abandoned me in Sonagachhi. On their advice I moved to Bhowanipore and began earning my livelihood afresh. As psychologists know and as I have also learnt from my long years in this detestable line of work, whatever is easily available in this world may be genuinely beautiful without being particularly captivating; but all that is rare is always the object of the greatest desire. I settled into a pleasant, well-appointed residence, masquerading as the barrister's sister-in-law, and tried to capture customers by remaining out of reach. The strategy proved successful. In childhood and adolescence I got an education, and afterwards, close association with people from all levels of society enabled me to gather the deepest secrets of the human heart. So when I, in the guise of Miss Mukherjee, made small talk and flashed my smiles amongst high society acquaintances, when I presented a new version of my departing youth, dressed in the latest fashion and gestures, to the leering eyes of the guests, when I enjoyed the breeze while strolling in the park in the evening, holding my supposed brother-in-law's hand, when I turned a stranger into a friend with a single glance, taking them home and pleasing them with the perfect cup of tea while feeling a great joy at provoking irresistible lust in their hearts, my dark self-centred persona did not catch anyone's eye; on the contrary, everyone was trapped in the spider's web I had spun and sought to converse with me in private. Of course, it must be admitted that sometimes I too… still, I convinced whoever was present that he was the only bee sipping amidst my petals, while the rest would have to be content with a mirage.

I cannot laugh today when I recall the number of times I feigned being a chaste woman. One evening I was sitting across the table from Mr Goswami on one side and Professor Chowdhury on the other. Both rich, both handsome. Holding the harmonium indecently close to my body, I deliberately exchanged perfection in my attire for slight carelessness in order to madden them more and began to sing.

Tonight’s the tryst
Where is he, how far
Do I have to go
My love flowered
At his touch
I spend my days
Waiting for the joy
Of meeting him

Mr Goswami said, ‘Now tell us who this fortunate man is.’ I said, ‘He lives in my mind, the perfect lover, he may not even be a real-life person.’ Pointing behind me, Professor Chowdhury said, ‘There he is, prince among men, here to surrender to you on his own.’ Both of them laughed loudly when I turned around to see who it was; I discovered my lawyer babu approaching, accompanied by a middle-aged man dressed most unsuitably for the times. A chain and watch, perfumed hair-oil, perfume, glasses, walking stick, shawl, knee-high socks, chapped lips, and everything else that was unseemly. Coming up to me, he said, ‘We stood outside for a long time, listening to your angelic voice. I’ve heard something as heavenly just the one time, at Moti Bibi’s house in Rambagan in Calcutta. I’m a jute trader from East Bengal. There are very few whores in this city who’ve never got money from me. But what I heard here today is not something I will ever hear anywhere else, I shall not part from you. Who are these people?’ He paid a tribute to me immediately with a guinea. Seeing the expression of my make suitors I uttered a hateful English word and shouted, ‘Durwan, durwan!’ When the doorman arrived I said, ‘Isko nikaal do.’ Then I took the responsibility of seeing him out myself and gestured to him to follow me. Walking him to the gate, I said, ‘I am yours and no one else’s. But you have to mind your behaviour, the two men in my drawing room think of me as their sister.’

It grew late, but both of them were obdurate; neither had any limit to their patience. Mr Goswami took his gold cigarette case from the House of Hamilton out of his pocket and put it on the table. Taking all the cigarettes

out, I wrapped them in paper and put the case inside the cupboard, saying, ‘You will have to return to Miss Mukherjee every evening if only for this valuable object; you will not get it back till the day I see your affection for her waning.’ Giving me an overwhelmed glance, Mr Goswami said, ‘Will that ever be possible? Can a day come when I forget you?’ Professor Chowdhury laughed. ‘So the case will never be restored to the gentleman’s pocket, it appears.’ Mr Goswami resorted to a few moments of silence out of remorse at the deterioration of the fate of his cigarette case. I shot another arrow at him. ‘Well? Are you thinking of a hunt?’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘You’re considering entering the lion’s den to hunt its beautiful cub, aren’t you?’ Exclaiming, ‘What kind of fiction is this?’ Mr Goswami made to leave, when Professor Chowdhury said, ‘But truth is stranger than fiction.’

As soon as Mr Goswami left I felt a headache coming on. Another failing, in the form of palpitations of the heart, appeared conveniently. Bad intentions always have an excuse—seemingly overcome, I allowed my body to fall back on the sofa, wailing, ‘How strong the light is,’ at which Professor Chowdhury promptly switched it off. Moonlight entered the room; he drew his chair to the sofa, whereupon I seized his hand and put it on my breast. ‘Ah professor Chowdhury, did you see how I taught Mr Goswami a lesson? He must have realised his three-hundred-rupee case is mine now, do you think he will ever return?’ Just as he was about to answer, I slipped his ring off his finger, saying, ‘Both of you are being tested now. The spark of sacrifice lights the fire of passion.’ Then I hummed,

On the touchstone of love
I shall rub you tonight.

About to enter, my barrister friend saw the room was dark and sensed the presence of two humans in the moonlight. ‘In that case, let me retire for the night,’ he said, and shut the door behind him. These two pimps of mine had

not been successful in their own professions, and hence they aided mine, sharing the spoils.

But still my hopes were not met. The money was never enough, especially since there were two other claimants. One day I told the barrister, ‘You’re hopeless, you haven’t been able to catch a single big fish yet. It won’t do to stroll around the city with your net, you have to cast it wider. What about that jute trader, what a juicy customer, a guinea at first sight, for a first touch he might well leave a trading ship or two behind at this port. Can you catch him again?’

My barrister pimp vanished for some time, and then returned with a spectacular achievement, bringing back a captive in the form of a polished and wealthy young man, the son of a zamindar, from Assam. The gentleman was a champion of celibacy, and lacked no enthusiasm for broadcasting his cause. Accepting our hospitality, he began singing the praises of abstinence on the very first evening. Accustomed as I was to deceiving men, I completed my dinner with the intention of engaging in private conversation with him on the subject later that night.

At midnight, I switched on the lights and the fan and proceeded to make stern and unforgiving comments against the natural attraction between young women and men. I said, ‘Evil humans are constantly alluring innocent men and women to the path of sin with artificial means on this sacred world created by god.’ As an example I showed the gentleman some images from Paris that I kept in a packet. The skilled hunter does not shoot down a mere bird—their prey are formidable beasts like lions and tigers.

As I demonstrated the particularly obscene aspects of the images, I observed that his aggression had quietened down, and he was excitedly gobbling them up with his eyes. Then I said, ‘It is all these hateful acts that are committed as a result of marriage or any other union of love between men and women. If you can live your entire life in celibacy, I will join you and assist you in spreading this noble gospel.’ He said, ‘Do you have more

pictures like these?' Now I brought him an entire box; he shifted his position closer to me, so much so that the false virgin in me immediately moved my chair further away for protection. He said, 'For what purpose have you collected all these photographs?' I said, 'In order to maintain a distance from sin it is necessary to understand what sin is, which is why I keep these pictures so carefully. But, how strange, when I hold these out in the privacy of my room to analyse their abhorrent ugliness, a hateful lust grows within me, as though… but no, I am too ashamed to talk of it. You have vowed to live a life of celibacy, I am embarrassed to tell you, not even the company of a handsome close relative with whom anything is forbidden is safe for me.'

The clock struck three, I proposed we rest. When he agreed, we lay down in the same room. I remained silent, feigning sleep, and he was not asleep either. I had already discovered he was extremely wealthy. Finally I spoke up. 'I have taken this house on rent, if I could get twenty thousand rupees I would buy it, and you and I could live here and spread this noble credo. If not, I will soon have to leave, I already owe a hundred rupees for three months' rent.'

He agreed at once, saying, 'With a partner like you I am willing to spend all I own on this mission.' Then I knew he was mine. Since he was not asleep yet—nor was there any prospect of sleep—I engaged myself in taking care of my new companion, the man with the sacred vow. Going closer to him, I said, 'You are finding it difficult to sleep in a new place, a little special attention will allow you to sleep.' I feared nothing now, for he was pure and so was I. Drawing his head down to my lap, I ran my fingers through his hair, saying, 'It is necessary to test the resolve of the man and the woman too.' Bringing up the subject of one of the pictures from Paris, I sketched it out in his imagination. At once he turned over on his side, while I laughed in my head at his discomfiture. We are demonesses, demonic

pleasure is what gives us joy. Having escorted him as far as the path of transgression, I made a bed for myself near him and lay down.

What a change I saw the next morning! A man who had been a stranger even a day ago, who had sworn never to accept anyone in marriage, had converted himself into my greatest devotee, my obedient slave, overnight. He could not live without the empress of all women, Maani, the prostituted woman, also known as Miss Mukherjee. The tea arrived, along with biscuits and a pair of eggs of the forbidden bird, but his besotted eyes did not leave me. When I busied myself with my cup of tea, he gulped down his own, now gone cold.

Within two or three months, I had the twenty thousand rupees I needed to purchase the house. I was now bedecked in jewellery; my reluctance to wear ornaments was not considered. One day I told the gentleman that I alone would take on the lifelong vow of celibacy; he could enter the life of a householder without hesitation. He said I would have to join him to accomplish such a transformation. Attempting to plug my ears with my fingers in response, I inadvertently displaced part of my clothing, which led him to come up to me like a madman, fold me in his arms closely and plant a breathless kiss on my cheek.

Soon afterwards came a proposal for marriage. I said, ‘I cannot take this decision, only dadababu can.’ When my so-called brother-in-law decreed marriage between an Assamese man and a well-educated Bengali woman impossible, my fumbling suitor withdrew to lick his wounds.

Prince Gopika Barman Roy was apparently a close friend of the abovementioned young zamindar; I was told that my rejected suitor was often invited to the residence of the prince. He had wanted to take me along too, but I could not accede to his request. However, I had extended an invitation to the prince through my suitor to call on me; he had not obliged, I do not know for what wrongdoing on my part. I was not known as a woman in prostitution at that time.

I have recounted here many incidents from this most unusual life of mine. I have shown my readers the kind of detestable acts people can perform when pursued by their proclivities. Humans are especially engaged in tarnishing all that is sacred. No one gives a second look at the uncovered visage, it is the face behind a veil, which can be despoiled by the touch of a sinful hand, that everyone is attracted to. Men do not want women who seek their company openly—instead, these sinful souls wish to draw the family-bound woman, who is forever terrified of being corrupted, into the filth. What happened to my avowedly celibate young man, for example? What happened to his promise to himself, or to his observance of his vow? It only needed the short-lived company of a woman to shatter his resolve, to convert his resistance to acceptance. He did not care that he had lost his wealth and honour and fame, he was gratified simply to be able to declare his allegiance to me.

I have not forgiven any of them. I was greatly valued amongst the circle of rich Marwari businessmen who lived in their opulent mansions. I even made a good deal of money from them. My lawyer pimp had once brought an eminent Marwari to me; at first glance he had said, ‘Bibi saheb, there is no beauty among the fat-bellied women of my clan, it is among other races that pleasure lies.’ He would ask me for words of love; I earned a guinea each time I addressed him as my beloved. I even snared two guineas for a kiss. From a single visit to his bungalow I made three hundred rupees. I was completely oblivious to the fact that the standard-bearers of the Hindu dharma are so adulterous and blinded by lust.

Chapter the Eleventh

The Tea Party

EVER SINCE I HAD SHIFTED to Bhowanipore, I was known as Miss Mukherjee, I was no longer Manada or Feroza Bibi or Maani didi. I hatched fresh plots every day, primary among them being the tea party. My pimps would visit after work, and as for my guests, they belonged to all classes. It needed a mere hour or two of conversation for me to select one among them. But those who came to me through this route were not a lucrative source of income, in fact I had to spend money on them. How were my two pimps and I to survive unless I could reach into rich men's pockets?

One day I told the barrister, 'I have an idea. Pick five men from each of the well-off sections of Calcutta—big businessmen, senior officers in mercantile firms, deputies and judges, zamindars, lawyers and barristers, schoolteachers and professors, patriots and reformers. Organise a lavish party and invite them all.'

The barrister showed me a list three or four days later, from which I pruned three names, these were people I knew already. He filled the gap with fresh names. The party was held on a Sunday; I had signed the invitations cards and had them delivered by hand. Not one schoolteacher came, and the only judge who did come, left before the party had ended. Almost all the lawyers and barristers and men working for the nation who were invited did come, as did many of the others. Light refreshments were served, and there was imported alcohol. The latter, however, was not served to everyone. I sang a Brohmosongeet and four songs of Rabindranath's on the occasion. Pradipkumar Roy sang a few songs too. One of the men working for the nation asked me to sing a nationalist song. I sang a new song.

You’ve tied my hands together
Not tied our hearts together
Discarded gold and didn’t know.
Tied up knots and didn’t know
With friends thirty crore
You could have won the world
It would have been easy
But now it’s too late.

After the song ended, arguments broke out over politics. One of the patriots began to criticise a leader named Padma Sarkar, running him down with allegations of his having one or two mistresses and having committed fraud. When Mr Ghosh protested, another man, also working for the nation, attacked him, stating without any hesitation that Deshbandhu Chittaranjan had committed a huge blunder in indulging the likes of such people. Deshbandhu had blundered—it broke my heart to hear this. I jumped up to protest, saying, ‘You and I do not have the ability to judge whether Deshbandhu was right or wrong, it is not up to mere mortals like us to go into the depths of his decisions. He never harboured any animosity or vengefulness towards anyone—it was because he knew how to size up a person that he had made room for a man like the one you mentioned. Just as wrestlers also serve a purpose, so too has Deshbandhu appointed him to do what is suitable for him.’

But the patriot would not give up. ‘Perhaps Deshbandhu has not yet been informed that the man is a traitor. Now his true self has been exposed, it was he who passed on information secretly to Maharaja Khounish.’ I said, ‘Why must you cross the limits of decency? Especially when Padma-babu is not here himself. I didn’t invite him to the party today because many eminent guests might not have come had they known.’

Still the man working for the nation continued, ‘Do any of you know why Biren Sasmal, Jiten Banerjee and Hemanta Sarkar left?’ I stopped him before it could get worse.

Mr Ghosh, who had gone into the other room with the barrister for a tonic, came out now and said, ‘Please don’t mind, Miss Mukherjee. The Dhaka papers said the other day a dead foetus had been found in a rubbish heap at a girls’ hostel. Do you not think this foeticide is the outcome of the free mingling we see nowadays?’ A visitor from Dhaka said, ‘Not one foetus but many.’

I said, ‘Free mingling is not wrong, though one must learn to protect oneself. You can see girls studying in the same colleges as boys these days —please observe how well they conduct themselves, just like siblings. Nature’s rule… brothers and sisters together… exactly what they…’ As the highly educated Miss Mukherjee, I had to support things against my wishes, for I had an image to maintain. And yet, it is because of this free mingling that I am a prostituted woman today.

Mr Ghosh said, ‘Are you trying to tell me that all these young men are pure as driven snow, that they spend the entire day in the company of fully grown women and yet feel nothing?’

I said, ‘I’m sure everyone does not respond the same way. But even if some of them do feel something—and if something harmless does ensue—is it so very wrong? It happens all the time in free countries, does it really matter?’

Mr Ghosh said, ‘Do you want to see our land turned into England or America then?’ I wasn’t sure what to say in response, but Mr Ghosh continued, ‘Moralist Heramba-babu apparently considers it sinful even to give directions to a theatre—it seems the men and women who go there do not have pure intentions. He would know if he were to try to understand the inclinations of the boys and girls who study together in his college through a secret ballot. Is Heramba-babu not aware of the outcome of free mingling which led to forced weddings among two Brahmo families in Dhaka, and the consequent return to the Hindu faith for one of them? Has he not heard

of the court cases involving Ramola Gupta and Lilabati? Ramola Gupta belongs to the same society as him, after all.'

I was not in favour of excessive discussion on this subject, especially since it was late in the evening now. Most of the guests took their leave, though a young man in khadi garments stayed behind. He was observing celibacy now, but he had something of a reputation. If the number of 'celibate' young women and men like him were to grow, I reflected, a sorry fate awaited our land.

Chapter the Twelfth

Garden Party

I AM A PROSTITUTED WOMAN MYSELF, who now pretends to be an unmarried woman from a respectable family—a deception that I no longer enjoy. Having saved several thousand rupees, I had decided not to continue in this sinful line of work, but the unhappiness of my two pimps has kept me here despite my reluctance.

Rani Mashi had tempted me to sell my body, for which she cannot perhaps be blamed, for it was her trade. But when I considered my insistent pimps, who were known as men from respectable families and also had degrees in higher education, it left me wondering whether there was any good left in the world. Ours is a race where well-educated gentlemen pimp for women in prostitution—they do not just pimp, they also tempt the woman to continue when she considers giving it up. And such gentlemen are held in high regard. I have observed that when a prostituted woman decides to give up her business, the other women help her—but look at these gentlemen and their ways. The other day Chuni, a well-off woman in prostitution from Rambagan hung herself; in her suicide note she had written: ‘I condemn this life of a prostituted woman.’ She had also advised others to give up this profession. It is impossible to explain to anyone how painful it is to remain engaged in a shameful line of work that the heart abhors. One day my lawyer pimp said, ‘I’m thinking of having a party at _____ -babu’s garden in Domdoma.’

I said, ‘Why Domdoma, if you must have a party, have it here.’ He paid no attention, reasoning that lucrative customers were more likely to be discovered at a garden party. Invitation cards were distributed with my name as the hostess, but I did not enquire about the list of the invited. On

the appointed day I went to Domdoma in my own car, driven by the barrister himself. I sat on his left, and the lawyer, behind us.

At the venue I found some two dozen people had already arrived, belonging to both the Hindu and Muslim communities. A group of young men in khadi clothes were busy organising things. I asked, ‘Who are these people?’ The lawyer said, ‘They’ve been invited by _____-babu, he is paying for the party.’ I was irked to see this particular gentleman also dressed in khadi, with his feet shod in sandals. For in the brothels I had met many young and middle-aged men dressed the same way, but my earnings from them were meagre. Just as the police get their way with us by virtue of the powers they hold, so too do many of these khadi-clad volunteers. They say, we have dedicated ourselves to working for the nation, how do you expect us to have any money? A number of poets and novelists also visit us in search of realistic art and speak in cultured voices, seeking to understand the true nature of art free of cost. So businessmen at least will not consider it wrong of me to have been annoyed.

I sang a song out of courtesy, and one or two others sang after me. Afterwards the discussion veered round to persecution of women, eliciting sharp responses from everyone. The primary reason for the observations was the silence of Muslim society. What a Muslim gentleman said in protest amounted to this: it is Hindu women who choose to take up with Muslim men, Muslims cannot be blamed for this. Maulvi Akram Khan had said something similar at the protest meeting he had convened. Citing the newspaper reports that had appeared a few days earlier about the ways in which the unmarried daughter of Abdul Rahim, a well-educated overseer from Mymensing, and the wife of Ghulam Sahib under the Katihadi police station were persecuted, I asked, were these women Hindus to begin with? Can Akram Khan Sahib think about this and answer? The Hindus at least had tried their utmost to rescue Rahim Sahib’s daughter, but the Muslims had made no such efforts. The inspector at the local police station, Ghoshal

mohashoy, is a Hindu, he tried to move mountains to accomplish his task. Unable to refute my argument, the maulvi sahib referred to the revolutionary poet Nazrul Islam's marriage, claiming that it had taken place at the behest of Hindus. He added, 'Would Nazrul have dared go to the girl's brother with the proposal unless he…' Interrupting, I said, 'You must not refer to those who have been married according to religious rituals, you cannot say anything about them.' He was forced to stop, though he looked angry. I said to myself, all this is nothing but the outcome of free mingling, but if the marriage lasts a little longer, it may become permanent.

The maulvi sahib was so shameless, however, that he continued, 'Many Hindu women move about practically uncovered these days, what is the reason for their deliberately not draping their sari over a particular organ on the right hand side?' I was too embarrassed to answer. Some married and unmarried women did in fact consider it fashionable not to cover parts of the body that even women in prostitution made sure to cover carefully. I retorted in a bad temper, 'It's best not to speak if one cannot speak without disrespecting women.'

At this, several eminent Muslim gentlemen left in unison, leaving only one or two behind. I no longer had any problem discerning the motive of the man introduced to me by my pimp as an intimate friend of the patron of the party and a tireless worker for Hindu-Muslim amity. Drawing my pimp aside, I told him with distaste, 'This profession of sin is ending today, no more. You have actually brought the kind of men I did not accept as a customer even at the brothel. Shame on your education.' The pimp said, 'How can there be Hindu-Muslim unity otherwise? It wouldn't be right to organise a party without them. That's why I did not object, he appeared to be a man of cultured taste.'

Now some people began to protest against the Sarda Bill for restraining the age of marriage. I had no wish to enter into this discussion, but when they insisted on asking for my opinion, what could I do? I forgot that I had

been speaking in the guise of a liberal woman of education; I could only remember the thousands of young girls who had been forced to seek sanctuary in prostitution because, unable to fulfil their sexual desires at the onset of womanhood, they had been driven to despair and engaged in illicit relationships. It struck me that only those who had been unable to camouflage their disgrace had done this—of course they could not be considered an insignificant number, and yet, how many of such illicit affairs actually came to light? No more than one or two in a thousand.

To everyone I said, ‘Since nature has decreed that women feel desire at the age of fourteen, it is best for them to be married before that.’ The maulvi sahib said, ‘I did not expect such a response from Miss Mukherjee.’ I said, ‘It’s not just me, you know the women’s league that marched to Town Hall the other day in support of the Sarda Bill? Ask them in private and they will all echo my views.’ I could restrain myself no longer. I cited significant instances such as the killing of foetuses at the girls’ hostel in Dhaka, or the illicit marriage between the Dases and the Guhas. I even mentioned the relationship between Syud Hossain and Motilal Nehru’s daughter.

‘I do not know the shastras, nor do I wish to know them. But how many valiant women exist who can for years altogether ignore the cup of wine held out to them when their hearts are thirsty? What do we see in England and America? Twenty out of a hundred girls have children before marriage; society does not ostracise them for this reason. Of course, if you want to turn India into America, that’s a different matter.’

Referring to the demonstration of support for the Sarda Bill, the maulvi sahib said, ‘Just the other day some three hundred women gathered at Albert Hall with the request to pass the Talaq Bill too.’ I did not know what to say in response. What is this mentality, Hindu women? It seems to me it will give you great pleasure to see all of India converted into Sonagachhi. Without answering, I said, ‘Since no one compels guardians to get their daughter married before fourteen years of age, if this is considered unwise,

it must be explained to everyone in the country why it should be so. But instead of this, those who are trying to hand over the matter of sex for Hindu women to the police are enemies of the nation. Since we shall soon secure independence, why can we not wait for the intervening period?'

That was the day I have vowed not to be part of this sinful trade anymore. I may not have conquered my desire as yet, but I shall try. I have abandoned prostitution; the money I have saved will enable me to live out the rest of my life. I do not know when I shall die, my wealth may not be exhausted before that. My pair of pimps proposed I make a will. I agreed, and asked them to prepare a draft. When I read it, I discovered that they had identified themselves as the heirs of my property after my death. I said, this is impossible—my assets must be utilised for women in prostitution and for the lower castes. If the government claims the prostituted woman's assets after her death, none of it is used according to her wishes, which is why several of Calcutta's prostituted women have donated their wealth to organisations engaged in reforming Hinduism. I have decided to do the same. The Hindu Sabha and the Hindu Mission are leaders in this respect.

Afterword

IF MANADA DEVI'S STORY APPEARS to end abruptly, it is left to us to investigate the reasons. Did events overtake her life in a way that prevented her from continuing with her memoir? How, in that case, did the manuscript find its way to a publisher? And what happened to Manada Devi eventually?

Research by scholars into this remarkable work, first published in 1929 by R Chakrabortty of Mymensingh, has cast some doubts over the existence of 'Manada Devi'. She may, studies indicate, be a figure created for the purpose of this book, a composite of many women who went through similar, harrowing experiences. The other possibility is that she guarded her identity so effectively that the real person was never identified.

In an introduction to the first edition, the author wrote, 'I had wished to include my photograph to advertise this book, but it has been left out on the request of my former tutor, the lawyer Mukulchandra Banerjee.'

The author was aware of the question mark over the identity of the writer of the book. In an introduction to the fourth edition, also in 1929, she wrote:

> *Doinik Bongobani* newspaper has hinted that this book has actually been written by the learned Shyam Sundar Chakraborty, and that the magnanimous Jitendralal Bandyopadhyay is the recipient of a portion of its profits. Among women in prostitution, anyone who willfully makes false allegations against another is made to pay a fine. In the absence of knowledge of whether the writer of the article in question has been prostituted or not, we bequeath the responsibility for judgement on the leader of the pack.

And earlier, in her introduction to the second edition, she wrote:

> I am told a group of people are concerned about whether my memoir is my own composition or that of a man. It is because of the low opinion that men hold of women that women have no choice but to demand equal rights today. If they wonder whether a prostituted woman is capable of writing a book, the answer is that if immoral men can write books or edit newspapers, why cannot immoral women do the same? Why, we have been told that books written by immoral women are particularly prized.

None of this takes anything away from the authenticity of this memoir. The individual incidents as well as the social and psychological commentary are faithful to real life in this period, offering an unusual perspective on a period in which the quest for freedom, progressive ideas and personal education are often considered to have been the drivers of individual and social behaviour. That the sexual instinct intersected with this arc is of particular interest. Indeed, the writer does not claim immunity from it, chastising herself for her moral choices and yet acknowledging that she was unable to resist physical desire.

In the introduction to the first edition, the author wrote:

> The title of this work may make many readers wonder about the objective of writing a memoir such as this one. A noble person might write an autobiography for noble purposes, but it does not capture society in its entirety. My life is not at all noble, quite the contrary, in truth. But the purpose of this memoir is noble. I am a sinful, tainted woman, I have no claim to a good reputation—therefore I can openly admit to the truths of my life in a way that no noble person has succeeded in doing. They cannot. But it is necessary to understand the true nature of sin. It was because I did not understand it in my adolescence that I—and not just I, but thousands like me—have been prostituted.
>
> This book has been written with the memories of the suffering and repentance I have experienced during my life as a woman in prostitution. Those who imagine our lives happy, who are desirous to consort with us, would do well to understand that if there is a hell on earth, it is our existence.
>
> I am abhorred by all, an untouchable—I have no place in society, and I do not deserve one either. But the portraits of a few of the debauchees in the garb of holy men who occupy high rungs of society despite consorting with us will enable readers to understand the world we live in. They will be astonished to know how these hypocrites ruin innocent girls.

Not unexpectedly, the book proved something of a success, with entire editions selling out in a few days, leading the author to write in an introduction to the second edition:

> By the grace of Shiva this book required a second edition within days of being published for the first time. This edition includes a few minor additions and alterations.
>
> My memoir includes some references to Suruchi, the daughter of an engineer. For this reason her brother has despatched a legal notice to me and my publisher with the intention of filing a

complaint in court. The notice says Suruchi is not a woman in prostitution, she did not visit me at my residence, she allowed me to visit her at home despite only because she knew I came from a decent family. Suruchi did not steal Krishnakumar babu's brother-in-law's watch, and so on and so forth.

I have not, and will not, respond to this notice. I await a court case. Should it materialize, the revelations about the world of women in prostitution that will emerge can only benefit the country…

It appears a "fallen" woman is valueless. Insulting her cannot lead to a claim of slander in the eyes of the law. But the same law works for "fallen" men, for men write the law. My lawyer says it is this loophole in the law that has compelled Suruchi to lie to the effect that she is not a prostituted woman. Can those in the Congress Party council who demand equal rights for men and women not seek remedy for this from the law? There will be no fresh cause for criticism were they to publicly demonstrate their sympathy with women in prostitution. For the people of the country know these particular types in the Congress Party council only too well. If no one presents these demands of ours at the next meeting, we will conclude that those who ask loudly for equal rights are pure liars. Either fulfil our demands, or make laws to expel these "fallen" men from the Congress council and elsewhere.

As commercial success continued apace, the book elicited not only praise from both high and low sections of society, but also the expected doses of moral outrage and downright vilification, leading the author to write, in the introduction to the fourth edition:

As a result of unsolicited criticism, both positive and negative, all four thousand copies in their first three editions have been sold out, leading to the publication of this fourth edition. Here too, a few minor changes have been effected.

A handful of ethical newspapers have found the scent of obscenity in this book and have criticized it accordingly. On the other hand, many of the honourable and respected leaders of the country and literary luminaries have opposed the views of the above mentioned moralists about this book, and informed us of this…

Prabhupada Atul Krishna Goswami has written about this book, 'The child receives milk alone from its mother's breasts but a leech can extract nothing but blood.'

The contemporary press was often approving. The *Amritabazar Patrika* newspaper said, 'It contains nothing but some revelations of some evils which are persistent in the modern Hindu society at present.'

Still, the possibility of the book being primarily a commercially oriented venture cannot be ruled out, especially as it was followed by the publication

of the supposed autobiography of the same Ramesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay who appears in Manada Devi's book. Enterprising publishers subsequently put the two volumes out together, gleefully titling it *Accusations and Counter-Accusations between Manada Devi and Ramesh-da*. But no matter what the motive of publishing Manada Devi's work, its value as a historical and sociological document is evident.

About the Author

Arunava Sinha is an award-winning translator of Bengali fiction, non-fiction and poetry into English. Over 60 of his translations have been published so far in India, and several of them in the UK and the USA. He teaches Creative Writing at Ashoka University, and is the Books Editor of the politics and culture magazine *Scroll.in*. His recently published translations include Taslima Nasreen's *Shameless*, Bani Basu's *Moom*, and *Desire for Fire: An Anthology of Modern Bengali Poetry*. His translation of Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *A Ballad of Remittent Fever* was longlisted for the JCB Prize 2020, and his translation of Manoranjan Byapari's *There's Gunpowder in the Air* was shortlisted for the JCB Prize 2019.

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